
IV
天鏡のアルデラミン
ねじ巻き精霊戦記
Alderamin on the Sky IV
宇野朴人
Uno Bokuto
キャラクター原案／口絵&本文イラスト さんば挿
カバーイラスト 竜徹
電撃文庫

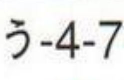
TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Illustration さんば


「帝国軍のトップにいらっしゃる皆様は、
もっと謙虚で賢明な方々だと
思っていたのですが――」
◇ソルヴェナレス・イグゼム
カトヴァーナ帝国軍元帥。ヤトリの父親。帝室に対する忠誠心が非常に高く、軍隊における規律には人一倍厳しい。
◇テルシンハ・レミオン
カトヴァーナ帝国陸軍大将。トルウェイの父親。ふだんは論理的で冷静だが、ときとして激しい感情を爆発させることも。
◇トリスナイ・イザンマ
カトヴァーナ帝国宰相。最高位に就く文官として、帝国の実権を握ろうとしている。本心を見せない不気味な男。


「正直言ってまったく自信がないわね」
「あ、あの……あんまりじろじろ見られると、恥ずかしいです」
「遊女に扮したそなたらの出番だ」


『ヨバイで本当は何をすっか、今はあても知っとるで』


「おらおら遅いぞデブ！
もっとテキパキ動きやがれ、このノロマ！」
キュキュ
キュ キュ
◇ポルミニュエ・ユルグス
帝国海軍一等海尉。エリーネフィン・ユルグス海軍大将の姪。見た目は可愛いが、船の上では……。


カトヴァーナ帝国
周辺地図
ガガルカサカノ大森林
大アラファトラ山脈
シナーク族居住圏
北域
北域鎮台第一基地
カトヴァーナ帝国
キオカ共和国
帝都バンハタール
ターバイ山脈
帝国軍中央基地
南ウルト森林地帯
エボドルク州
ヒルガノ列島
N
S
Alderamin on the Sky
IV

contents

PROLOGUE

“Young princess, thou existence is both miserable and pitiable.”

The man spoke while looking with eyes full of sympathy. No, he declared so.

The man with average height and average slim body wore navy blue blazer and pants, which he owned many spare pairs of. The girl remembered feeling awed yet afraid of the man who, when acting as a public official, wore the exact same clothes as he smiled towards the crowd.

“Why art thou miserable? If it needs to be explained, it is because thou hast been born a royalty of Katvana Empire. To be born a royalty of an empire that is on the verge of collapse, I believe there is no greater misfortune. It is because the privilege thou must enjoy as a royalty had all been sucked away by thy ancestors, and thou stands in front of the fate of paying the price of their decadence.”

Those soft smiles that could calm down an angry crowd, turned into quiet smiles of pity whenever they faced the girl. The man never shouted nor reprimanded her and simply pitied her.

“Why art thou miserable? It is because thou possess enough wisdom to understand thy position even after growing up in the lands of Kioka. Thou art wise. Thus when thou arrive at the correct answer, thou will be able to realize if that answer was a good or a bad one. It is impossible for thou to not see thy country is corrupt. Only ignorance could have been thy salvation, but thy bliss of ignorance has long been stripped away.”

There were no thorns in the man’s speech, but it carried its own brand of poison. The kind of poison that would build up inside after

being consumed for years which would interfere and wreak havoc within the girl's values. Slowly but surely it would narrow the girl's future.

"Those ministers might have sent thoust as a political hostage, but I have no desire to treat thou as one. While thou stays in this country, my first present to thee is freedom as a visitor. Go where thy heart wishes, make friends as thy desires, and expand thy horizon. If thou wishes, I shall send a guide, but I will not force it on thee. I shall not tell anyone beforehand where thy wishes to go so they can prepare a reception party either. I have no desire to put on a charade to make this country appear more prosperous than it is. The reason for that is simple. It is because even a monkey will be able to recognize that this is a more sane country than the empire."

Many restraints and few freedoms. It was the two tools used to turn a person into a puppet, but the man preferred using the opposite. Many freedoms and few restraints. It even appeared like a healthy education at glance, but the product of it was not a mere puppet with no will of its own, but something with a freakish imitation of a will.

"But thou cannot forget thy art an outsider. No matter how long thou stays here, Kioka will not accept thee as its citizen. To not forget this, thou shalt return to the empire whenever an opportunity arises. The moment thy understands Kioka and returns, thou shalt truly understand the empire. Thou shalt realize the feeling of unending emptiness."

The girl tried to block out the sound with her hands after not being able to take it anymore, but there was no escape. The man's voice easily pierced through her hands and rang out inside her head.

"Accept it, young princess—Thou hast been rotten since the day thou bloomed."

The man's smile became crooked and the white surrounding changed. What filled the sight was an angry mob twisted with hunger. They were looking at somewhere with their bloodshot eyes and shouting. She could not hear their voice, but she understood they wanted help.

Then she realized she was holding a bowl of porridge. It could stave off a person's hunger—she looked around at that thought and spotted a mother holding a baby. The flies had already gathered at the scent of death from the child weakened by hunger. At the sight, she rushed towards the woman and the baby with no hesitation.

Feed this to the child—She tried handing the bowl of porridge while saying that. But the woman did not accept the bowl as if she could not hear. The girl became anxious. Please take the bowl. The child will die soon as this rate. Please let me save this child before that happens—

The moment the girl clung to her, the bowl flew in the air. The child's mother had swung her arm to hit it away. In front of the girl's eyes, a person's salvation had spilled on the cracked earth. In half-frenzied state, the girl reached out her hands to gather it back, but there were only dry sand under the flipped bowl.

Along with scream that would not materialize, the scenery changed again. When she came to, the girl was standing alone in pitch darkness. While stumbling through the darkness in loneliness and anxiety, there was dim light coming from a corner. In the centre of the light, there was a very familiar black haired boy standing there.

Solork!—She cried out his name and ran mindlessly towards the boy. He seemed far away despite looking so close and she could not reach the light despite running until her breathing became harder. However, the girl did not give up. She knew it was her last chance to

earn salvation. If she missed this chance, she would have nowhere to go.

Long time had passed. She had ran with all her might to the point it felt like her limbs would fall apart, but her surrounding was filled with light without her realizing. After finally arriving where she wanted to be, the girl breathed easy and walked closer towards the black haired boy. He was looking down at the ground. She approached cautiously while wondering if he was in a bad mood. She hesitantly reached out to the boy. The boy raised both his hands as if replying—and plunged a knife in one of his hand deep into her chest.

She lost strength in her body and fell. The black haired boy climbed on top of her and kept stabbing down with the knife. But she took those hate filled attacks and the pain that ripped her skin and organ with an eye of understanding. As if that was what she truly desired.

An arm dyed with red slowly rose and caressed the boy's cheek with trembling fingers. Wanting to hug him and give her thanks, but knowing that she had no right to in her heart—

"—What is it, your highness!"

Her sleeping consciousness came back to reality at the sound of loud knocks. Her heart still pounded loudly and her whole body was hot and aching as if she had just ran with all her might.

After realizing they were all lingering effects from a dream, the third princess Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik raised her upper body from the bed.

"… It's nothing. It was a simple sleep paralysis. I'm sorry to be so loud in the early morning."

"I understand. If it's only that, I am relieved… Did you have a nightmare?"

When the guard standing outside the door asked, the princess stopped moving on her bed and fell in thought. She did not need to answer seriously, but she still did not want to reply lightly.

“Your highness…? I apologize, did I ask strange…?”

As if her hesitant atmosphere had been conveyed across the door, the guard apologized in a quiet tone. Chamille smiled bitterly and swayed her head.

“… It was a nightmare until the middle, but I see those nightmares even when I am awake. There is nothing to be afraid of all of sudden.”

“Is, is that so…?”

“Still—the ending wasn’t that bad. It was a dream about the end of nightmare… a dream of salvation.”

The princess murmured so and squinted at the sun to lookout the window. The elongated shadow of buildings and tree branches, and a flock of bird that flew across blue sky. A beautiful and peaceful morning scenery the opposite of her dream was laid out.

—Imperial Army Northern Defense Force. 18,320 mobilized. 3,774 killed in action by complete pacification of Shinak rebellion. 1,234 missing in action. 5,000 injured, mostly due to altitude related sickness.

3 months and 12 days after the outbreak of rebellion, Ra Shaia Alderamin Holy Army attacked from the north with force of 12,000. In response, the Northern Defense Force selected 1,800 to form a rearguard unit from 8,000 remaining troops. 1 battalion of 600 men led by Captain Senpa Sazaruf carriedy out stalling tacticsdelaying duty at the warfront and retreated after 8 days of combat. Relieved by unit that had been building temporary fort in the rear.

22 days after the retreat, all Northern Defense Force deployed to Great Alpatra mountain range withdrawn. Until the end of mission, 372 killed in action from rearguard unit and 344 missing in action (majority is believed to be captured), 431 injured. Defensive actions continue in southern part of the mountain.

4 months and 26 days after the outbreak of the rebellion, reinforcement of 10,000 from the centre arrives. In response, Ra Shaia Alderamin Holy Army stops all offensive and stand off with the empire from the strong points in the Great Alpatra mountain rage. The Imperial Army decides taking back the territory at current state is unlikely and concentrate on strengthening current defensive line along the bottom of the mountain.

28 days after the stand still, the line has been declaredis decided stable and withdrawal from the border is accepted. The “Northern War” started by conflict at the north is considered to have ended at this point.

Total mobilized troop - 23,720 from Northern Defense Force, 10,000 from centre to total of 33,720.

Total casualty - 4,617 killed in action, 2,091 missing in action, 7,176 injured. Estimated dead projected to grow to over 7,000.

Remarks - Due to invasion of Ra Shaia Alderamin Holy Army, over 4,000 Shinak tribe refugees descends from Great Alpatra mountain range. Temporary refugee camp built in southern part of the north. Following the treaty with the Chief Nanak Dar, there is a need to appoint a permanent settlement .

“—do you understand. This is the blood we spilled due to this war.”

A tall and elderly officer with fully buttoned up uniform smacked the papers he read with the back of his hand. The jade eyes glanced across the room.

“But what we need to discuss here is the cause for this blood spilt…”

Katvana Empire’s Army General Tersingha Remion’s slightly raised voice rang out with accusation. Despite being a wide room due to the surrounding stone wall, the interior felt heavy. There was one large table in the room with two Generals at the head, three lieutenant generals and the chancellor to the right and eight major generals along with four witnesses and their scribe to the left.

At the foot of the table was the trembling man surrounded with four soldiers with wind guns and receiving the gaze of all the generals, the commander of the Northern Defense Force.

“I will ask first. What do you think of this, Lieutenat General Tamutsukusuku Safida.”

When called out, the parched lips beyond the unkempt moustache shivered.

“It’s, it’s not my fault…”

“Oh?”

“It was an unfortunate loss, but it’s the result of my carrying out the duty as the commander of the defense force! For the empire, the Shinark tribe are like a parasite in the belly of the lion and it needed to be exterminated! I simply carried out my duty!”

After hearing a serious reply, General Remion’s jade eyes had clear sign of contempt.

“… As the commander of the Northern Defense Force, your job was the maintenance of the peace in the north. Do you disagree?”

“O, of course.”

"You just claimed you carried out your duty. With over 7,000 casualties and equally high body count with the Shinark tribe, do you still claim you have accomplished your duty of maintaining the peace?"

General Remion turned away from flabbergasted Lieutenant General Safida and looked towards the four lower ranking officers seated to left.

"Lieutenant General you seem to feel that it's unjustified to blame based only on the results. Then let us look at the cause of it. That is why I called you four."

"… Yes, sir. I am prepared to answer any question you may have."

Captain Sazarf replied while being rigid with nervousness. The cleanly shaven face compared to all the shaggy stubble from the battlefield made him look younger than usual. The three who were sitting beside him, Ikuta, Yatori and Torway bowed towards General Remion as well.

"Then I will ask from the start, Captain Senpa Sazarf. First, why did the Shinark tribe rebel?"

"Under the orders of the Commander in the north, there were many oppressive policy directed towards the Shinark tribe. Increase in tax, restriction of trade, confiscation of the spirits and so forth. I believe that the situation simply blowed up into the rebellion."

"All those orders seem to be outside the jurisdiction of the military."

"The commander had very good relationship with the high ranking officials in the northern provinces."

Captain Sazarf spoke coolly. The Lieutenant General himself remarked "Don't make things up!", but when General Remion

glanced over, closed his mouth. The story continued without anymore interruption.

“So, is it safe to assume the oppressive policy resulting from Lieutenant General Safida’s commands are one of the main causes for this rebellion?”

General Remion continued onto the next story after looking at the four witness nod.

“Then, onto the second question… The 3,000 casualties that occurred until suppression of the Shinark tribe was complete. What was the cause for this casualty?”

Captain Sazarf glanced over and Yatori stood up. A brave voice listed out the cause.

“I will answer in place of the Captain, sir. The greatest reason for high casualty amongst the mobilized troop was due to inferior planning from the start.The attack into Great Alpatra mountain range despite the Shinark tribe occupying all advantageous positions, overextending the supply chain by marching too far away from each other, and the rigid command structure not allowing troops to retreat from a position increased the casualties. But most of all, there was improper preparations for altitude sickness—”

Lieutenant General spoke outraged at the list that was flowing out endlessly.

“S, shut up! What does a mere junior officer know of strategy!”

“Lieutenant General, I allowed her to speak. Do you believe you have the authority to reprimand her?”

General Remion made the issue clear and continued on with “also”.

“Thanks to the mere junior officers as you called them, the Northern Defense Force escaped annihilation. Do not forget that… Lieutenant Yatori Igsem, you may sit.”

After making Yatori sit, General Remion shifted his gaze towards the black haired boy.

“Lieutenant Ikuta Solrock, I will ask the third question to you. After the rebellion, you were attacked by Ra Shaia Alderamin Holy Army that had crossed the Great Alpatra mountain range from the north. How did this happen?”

Ikuta rose from his seat to answer with a slightly lazy expression.

“—I do not know enough about diplomatic issues to speak about it, but I can only talk about the situation on the ground. The Ra Shaia Alderamin Holy Army cited the Northern Defense Force’s abuses against the spirits as the casus belli.”

“Did it appear to be a legitimate excuse in your eyes?”

“For examples in the war, there were definitely occasions of soldiers applying unnecessary violence against the spirits. I was part of the attempt to diffuse the situation so I can speak confidently on this issue.”

“And before the war?”

“I had witnessed confiscated fire spirit and wind spirits stuffed in the 1st Northern Military Base jail. The spirits had not received any sunlight so they were mostly incapable of moving.”

“Hmm, that seems to match up with Captain Sazarf’s testimony as well. Lieutenant General Safida, I heard that you commanded to confiscate the spirits. Is that true?”

"I, I didn't order that! It wasn't me! My subordinates did that on their own."

After hearing him trying to shift the blame, Ikuta could not hold it anymore and let out a sneer.

"Who was the one who said something about needing to exterminate the parasite in the belly of a lion."

"You bastard!"

General Remion stared down Lieutenant General Safida from standing up in outrage and turned his jade coloured eyes to Ikuta.

"Lieutenant Solrock, refrain from unnecessary remarks. If this happens again, you will be removed from the proceeding."

The boy who had his back pinched by Yatori only appeared remorseful on the outside. General Remion's eyes stayed briefly on his son before moving over to Lieutenant General Safida once again.

"But, Lieutenant General, there is lack of consistency in what you have been saying. You claimed Shinark tribe was a parasite and you were simply exterminating them, but claiming the confiscated spirits were something your subordinates did on their own. Do you believe that kind of argument would work here?"

The Lieutenant General tried to open his mouth to make more excuses, but pressures from all sides prevented him from doing so. The generals seem to be silently saying don't show any more ugliness.

"Then let us summarize the story until now. First, the reason for Shinark tribe rebellion. This was due to oppressive policy led by Lieutenant General Safida. Second, the large casualty until the end of the suppression. This was due to inept strategy from Lieutenant

General Safida. Third, the cause for attack from the Ra Shaia Alderamin Holy Army. This is because the excuse he gave them by abuse against the spirits due to Lieutenant General Safida's policies."

Lieutenant General Safida understood after General Remion started to talk in definitive term. It was not a court martial anymore. The generals had already confirmed the evidences. But there was no need to bring in witnesses if that was the case.

"You abused the Shinark tribe without any reason, let soldiers under your command die without reason and invited in the enemy with your ignorant actions. They are all your crimes.

Rewarding those who performed exemplary and punishing the guilty. The war criminal Tamutsukusuku Safida is sentenced to death in front of all those attending here. That is why we have opened this cumbersome process."

There was no one who objected to the list of crimes that was read out. In the silence of the trial that was decided from the start, General Remion finished his role as the master of the ceremony looked towards another general seated beside him.

"Marshal, please deliver the verdict according to the military law."

With a nod, the owner of spiky red hair stood up. Standing over six feet tall, rock hard muscles that had no faults and sabres and main gauche at least two sizes bigger than Yatori's that did not come off even in front of the king.

It was Katvana Empire's Marshal, Solbenares Igsem. But people who called him by name were few. Except when looking back in history, the title Marshal only referred to him in the country.

"Effective immediately, Imperial Army Lieutenant General Tamutsukusuku Safida is relieved of his duty as the commander of the Northern Defense Force."

The Lieutenant General's teeth clattered. The Marshal's words were as good as if it was transcribed on a board of iron.

"You are hereby demoted to rank of private, and stripped of all medals. Safida family's wealth will be confiscated, except for the minimal amount of salary, and will be awarded to the wounded and the family of the deceased."

For anyone who was in the military, they would know that the verdict was a final decision that could not be overturned.

"And, Private Tamutsukusuku Safida—"

In front of the incarnation of the law himself, there was no mercy. Thus.

"NOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Tamusukusuku Safida, now demoted to a private and waiting for execution stood up from the chair and shouted. The soldiers tried to restrain him, but the resistance was strangely fierce. It very much resembled a dying animal's final resistance.

"Mercy! Please, Marshal, your honour. General, your honour. Please, mercy! I don't need any rank or medals! I don't care if it's a private or a janitor! Please, not my life!"

"The verdict is final."

"No! I don't want to die. I'm not going to die! W, w, what is death?! Is it dark?! Is it cold?! Or is it an endless silence?! Or is where you go determined by good and evil you do like the priests say? Then will I be going to hell?"

General Remion who felt it was foolish to even feel contempt at Safida's ugliness wrapped his hand around his forehead. Marshal Igsem did not show any interest like he was looking at a rock on a side of a road.

"Someone, someone help me! Anyone, anybody…"

When the generals remained silent, Safida looked around everywhere on hope of salvation and finally looked towards his former subordinates seated on the side.

".. If it's you! Yes, you…!"

Safida dragged the soldiers who were trying to restrain his arms to where Ikuta and others were sitting.

"Please, I beg you! Please help me…! You all are heroes. You are the Empire's saviours! If it's from you all, even the Marshal won't ignore it!"

When he begged pathetically, Torway turned to look away from him. Yatori kept her silence. Ikuta yawned and rubbed his eyes. Only Senpa Sazarf smiled bitterly and spoke.

"… Commander, your honour. I don't think you hold that position anymore but I will call you so… For me, I heard many other shouts similar to ones you made. Countless comrades died shivering in same fear you have. Some leaving a family behind, some leaving a lover behind. Everyone leaving behind something in this world…"

"I was wrong! I'll pay for it no matter what, so…!"

"Pleas stop. I don't know anything difficult about paying the price for it or whatnot. I just… want you to do your duty as the commander who was responsible for the war."

Captain Sazarf spoke while maintaining his smile.

“The one who commanded the operation is responsible for the operation. Even an idiot like me knows the military’s principle. So, Commander, your honour… you cannot avoid this. Even if that principle sentences you to death as the Marshal said.”

The Captain paused to stand up slowly and bowed his head.

“I beg you - die cleanly… So even one more comrade who passed before us can go to heaven, and for us, who will follow after can go to a better hell.”

Safida lost his words. Captain Sazarf’s gentle voice had something special that could even silence a man begging for his life at the edge of death. Even generals who considered him a mere Captain pulled at the edge of their clothes.

“Enough. Take him!”

On General Remion’s command, even the soldiers lost their sympathy. Restrained on all fours and gagged to prevent anymore attempt to beg for his life, he was dragged out like a cumbersome piece of luggage. The door closed with heavy thud and General Remion started talking as silenced descended once again.

“… I hereby close the court martial of Imperial Soldier Takutsukusuku Safida. We will hold strategic meeting. Except Captain Senpa Sazarf, all witness is excused… you all have worked hard to respond to the summon.”

The General’s tone also sounded like an apology for making them attend this corny theatrics. With those words as a signal, Ikuta, Yatori and Torway stood up, saluted and left the room.

“- For the promotion, is it alright not to inform you son about it, your honour, General Remion?”

One of the Lieutenant Generals who was relaxed after the tension had dissipated. The General swayed his head and replied crisply.

“Even if I don’t say anything, news will reach them soon… And I don’t have a son who’s foolish enough to be happy about a promotion in situation like this.”

“Even if so, to not even talk to him from the start to the end, why was he summoned.”

“I didn’t call him over to praise him. There’s enough symbolic meaning to have him attend here. You wouldn’t be slow enough not to understand that as well, Lieutenant General Kimberly.”

Lieutenant General Kimberly shrugged at the sharp retort. General Remion lead the meeting to bring the conversation back from getting side tracked.

“Then we will proceed with the meeting as planned. But, Captain Senpa Sazarf, I have to something to tell you first. You have been promoted to Major.”

Because it was said so matter of factly and added at the end of the sentence, Captain Sazarf could not react. The General saw he was flustered and added on the explanation.

“Ah, I apologize if I surprised you. Official announcement will arrive soon. But it’s the same case with my son… apologies, Lieutenant Torway Remion as well. It was done with the situation and the military law in consideration. You would need to be at least a senior officer to attend this strategic meeting without an issue.”

General Remion explained while smiling bitterly. Sazarf felt amiable towards the general. It was quite a different atmosphere from before, but after that harsh expression had gone away, he could feel

the same warmth as he had from Torway. Perhaps this was his real self.

“But… I would like for you to at least understand why you’re here.”

With those words as warning, Sazarf felt the generals focus on him once again and tensed up. He was being judged here. He could not afford to relax.

“… I can only be embarassed if I mistook it… But I believe it’s for my opinion on the situation regarding the Shinark tribe refugees resulting from the war…”

Sazarf answered hesitantly. Seconds passed after the reply and the atmosphere remained the same.

“—Good. You understand the position and the situation you are in.”

General Remion nodded satisfactorily and continued the meeting.

“After the Aldera Holy Army occupied the Great Alpatra mountain range, many Shinark tribesmen were displaced. Over 4,000 refugees have flowed into the north and are staying at temporary shelters.”

“It’s obvious that they will cause problem with the citizens after losing their homes. We would need a quick response.”

“But not many provinces would gladly take them in. Afterall, mass migration weakens security and especially since they are Shinark tribe that we were at war with not too long ago. Local officials and residents will oppose fiercely.”

“Even if someone couldn’t avoid drawing the short stick, don’t we have ways to alleviate that? Ideally, we should send them to area that is most secure and hope for co-operation. Realistically, we can consider places with low population but good lands. The living might

not be so well off to start in those land, but if there's nobody to fight with, there won't be any conflict…"

The flag officers participated eagerly compared to the corny act of a court martial from before. Amidst the elites filled with intelligence and confidence, Sazarf started to feel this was not a place he could interject.

"Do not discuss politics as a soldier."

One sentence from Marshal Igsem halted the active discussion at once.

"No matter what province takes them, that is their authority. Our role exists only before and after. Escorting the Shinark tribe from the temporary camp to the settlement, policies to ensure security in the area, and the execution of that plan. Any act to carry out duty beyond that is overreaching your authority."

With a warning in heavy and low voice, the flag officers checked their uniforms again. There was no doubt that was the proper answer.
But.

"I know I am overreaching, Marshal, your honour."

There was one person who had the grit to resist that proper answer. No, in the history of this country, the family which produced many renown green haired generals had always taken that role.

"But the reality and the ideal is never the same. Without careful preparations from us, there is no way this country's officials would take the refugee issue seriously. They will only begin to eat after we have seated them down, cooled down the soup and sliced the meat into bite size pieces."

General Remion and Marshal Igsem looked at each other directly. Sazarf had often heard that the highest ranking meeting often divided down these two people. However, he had never imagined he would see the day he would see it for himself.

“I agree with the general. We need to discuss specific plan for negotiation here as well. If it gets simply passed onto municipality level administration, it’s sure to come back as a bigger issue in less than two months.”

“Wait, hold on, Major General Gauts. The overreaching our authority like that is our bad practice that the Marshal worries about. Military for military and administration for administration. Especially since we are at the beginning stage, we should draw the line. Safida issue came from that ambiguous distinction as well.”

“This isn’t something we should discuss on theory. We can’t ignore the interior ministry, but it’s unrealistic to not prepare at all as well. The General used a meal as a comparison earlier, but they need to do at least eating the meat themselves. We can transfer over to them after ironing out most of the issue, so we don’t have to flatter the nobles as much.”

The voices supporting Marshal Igsem and General Remion clashed head on and neutral officers who did not want any side to lose face offered compromises. It Sazarf’s eyes, it symbolized the balance of power within the military. As rumoured, Igsem faction and Remion faction was sharply standing off against each other in the military.

“… Ah~ May I… say something.”

When Sazarf hesitantly raised his hand, the high ranking officers all focused on him. While feeling his own life span shortening from all the attention, he said the words he had been preparing.

“I know it may be a proposal beyond my authority… but regarding the Shinark refugee issue, I wish for you to entrust me with a regiment of men.”

At the same time in the south-west area of the Imperial Central Military Command, there were 400 soldiers and civilians several times them in front of the temple.

“—To tread under Hosut is an honour. With self-sacrifice for the greater good…”

In front of all who stood solemly, a chubby boy with brown curly hair was reading out a eulogy. He was one of the Northern Front War’s hero who was selected for this role, Lieutenant Matthew Tetzirich.



“—I pray so that all our comrade may join our lord.”

The one who stood beside him, the tall female officer, Lieutenant Haroma Bekel, jumped in after looking for an opportunity to hop in. The words those two spoke was what had been sent down by the high command. But they could not stop people questioning the content of the eulogy.

‘Can our comrades who passed on really go to where the lord is?’

Matthew, Haro and all the soldiers standing behind were concerned about lack of priests in the procession. This war was against the main country of the Church of Aldera. The priests could not decide on what to do with the deceased and decided not to attend the ceremony. Normally this ceremony was suppose to take place in the temple in the capital, Vanhatal.

“- To the front, salute!”

The two voices rang out as one. Thinking of everyone they can never meet again, all soldiers and spirits saluted towards the temple as one. The sob from families of deceased came to Matthew and Haro’s ears like waves.

When the ceremony finished, most soldiers turned right on the commander’s orders and left. Few, including Matthew and Haro remained to guide away the civilians. At that moment, there were three who were going the other way from the crowd. The person at the front was the red haired girl the two of them knew very well.

“Matthew, Haro. Good job. You seem to have done the job well.”

“My shoulders are stiff… Well, barely… You guys are done faster than I expected.”

Matthew spoke while slightly rotating his shoulders. Beside Yatori, Ikuta and Torway shrugged.

“We were only called as extras for the court martial. Well, we made sure certain somebody’s finished, so don’t worry.”

“This?”

Matthew motioned his thumb across his neck. Ikuta swayed slowly and extended his index finger like a gun barrel.

“It’s this. Since firing squad is the Imperial tradition.”

“Ah~… Is that how it turned out.”

Haro murmured with a sigh. Then Ikuta added on “But”.

“The court martial is over for Private Safida, but there’s still the ecclesiastical court. Since abuses against the spirits goes against the canon.”

“Until the diplomatic relation with Aldera Headquarter resumes, that will probably be delayed. I don’t think he’s likely to receive a capital sentence in ecclesiastical court, but what happens if he does? They can’t execute the same person twice.”

“There are precedences. Even though I don’t really want to think about it.”

The black haired boy shrugged. Torway, who was sure to ponder about the “precedence” quickly switched the topic.

“T, this temple is strange no matter how many times I see it.”

Torway spoke up while looking up at the structure ahead. What stood there was a dull silver octagon monument. Its width was 40 meters, length 80 meters and height easily 20 meters. At the top was a banner with a single star denoting Church of Aldera.

"I can't see any openings on the wall. I heard it's made of something really strong that won't get dented even with a cannon ball… How did the god sculpt something like that?"

"Maybe the god simply used a scissor and glue."

Haro opened and closed her fingers to imitate a scissor. Ikuta put his hands on his waist and sighed before speaking.

"It's Doctor Analai's theory that any material can be processed using suitably high temperature or pressure. If this wall is really cast metal, then it would have been made with extremely hot furnace that can't be compared with the ones right now."

"Hmm, a furnace favoured by the god."

"I think only humans use furnace, but… Anyways."

After casting a suspicious eye at the holy structure that only priests could enter, Ikuta looked at the other direction. At the end of it was the meeting room only for command staff that him, Yatori and Torway had been called into.

"I'm worried about Captain Sazarf we left behind. By now he should be talking about the Shinark tribe issue with the command staff. I hope he does well…"

Matthew suddenly made an ambiguous expression. Yatori reassured the two who were ambivalent about the situation.

"Trust and leave it to him. You already know from this war that the captain is a trustworthy person."

"I suppose you're right. That's why I entrusted him with the job… But the reason I'm anxious is elsewhere than the captain."

Still staring at the direction of the meeting room, Ikuta continued with crooked lips.

"There wouldn't be an issue with just the command staff… but there's a fox mixed among them."

What a sudden and gaudy request. That was the high ranking officers' honest thoughts on Sazarf's request.

"Major Sazarf. You are one of the heros of the Northern War, and you have a bright career ahead of you because of that. Of course, that cannot be denied…"

One of the major generals spoke in reprimanding tone. But his eyes had glint of disappointment in them.

"But… even then. Isn't your request over the line? I don't think you are not aware of this, but a regiment is the largest unit size utilized during peacetime. What you said is no different from asking to be given your own army…"

"That request is out of place, but moreover, don't you think it's inappropriate to ask such a thing in place like this? We're here to discuss about the Shinark tribe refugees, not your rewards."

Each general staff poured out their criticism. Sazarf had expected something like this to happen, but his own stomach felt like it was aching.

"This is unfortunate, Major Sazarf. I thought you were a more humble and wise person."

Amidst the criticisms, there was a sound of someone snickering with his mouth closed. In that moment, every high ranking officer's attention shifted from him to somewhere else. The only non-military man in the room was sitting beside the Lieutenant Generals.

"… Chancellor, what is so funny?"

One of the major generals asked in a low tone. The person who received the question, however, did not stop laughing.

"No, nono, nonono! Rewards and prizes, I just find it hilarious that you all speak of something that doesn't fit in this conversation!"

It was a scathing laughter towards all the high ranking officers who were criticizing Sazarf.

"Ah, Major Sazarf, should I tell them instead? Ah, so regrettable. I thought everyone here at the Empire's Military High Command were more humble and wise men."

"What are you trying to say!"

One of the major generals raised his voice and banged the table with a fist. That action only triggered more laughter from the man.

"What am I trying to say? Fu, fufufu, what am I trying to say..?! You should have asked that question to yourself before giving a lecture that doesn't fit in this place."

The high ranking officers grew impatient at the man's attitude of looking down on others. The atmosphere grew more hostile by the second and General Remion was forced to mediate.

"Order, order! This isn't the assembly. We have no time for petty arguments! It's not only the Shinark tribe that rides on this decision!"

At those words, even the officers who were ready to explode calmed down. The man who grated on everyone's nerve smiled only slightly now. Once the meeting room had calmed down, General Remion turned his attention to Sazarf once again.

"Major Sazarf, I do not believe you are an impetuous person."

"Ye, yes…"

"So could you tell us the true reason behind your request. If we entrust a regiment to you, what do you plan to do?"

General Remion's jade eyes looked at him with unparalleled sharpness. Sazarf swallowed his saliva and replied.

"I, I wanted to set up a base in the eastern part of the Empire… And house all Shinark refugees there."

"All of them?… What do you mean?"

"Currently, following the collapse of the Eastern Defense Force and dispersal of the residents from the area, there's abundant empty lands in the eastern part of the Empire. It has been a while since we could harvest from the vast tracts of farmland left behind. Because of that, I heard that the army defending the eastern border was reliant on supply lines stretching all the way from the centre."

"Hmm, you are correct. Even though we tried to bring the citizens back, they're afraid of another invasion. Considering the uncertainty in current situation with the Kioka, it's not unreasonable either."

"We send the Shinarks in meantime. We entrust them to produce military supplies, and the army can purchase the supplies in bulk. They would be an army affiliated farmers of sort."

The high ranking officers began paying more attention to Sazarf's explanations. The ones who understood the concept started forwarding their opinions as well.

"We can utilize the unused lands and solve the supply issue at the same time… It's not a bad idea, but I anticipate few problems. First, how wiill the Shinark tribe themselves accept being farmers. If it goes

as your proposal, they would be raising the crops we select out for them."

"There will be dissenting voices, but if we can realistically explain it to them, I believe that will convince them. We can also make the Shinark tribes raise a crop that's familiar to them."

"Familiar crop…? Wait, you're saying it won't be wheat and cotton?"

On that question, Sazarf took out a fistful of dried grain from his pocket.

"This is the corn they will be growing. This strain could grow in the harsh and dry conditions of the Great Alpatra mountain range. I believe we can expect even greater harvest if it's grown in conditions suited for it. From same amount of land, at least three times more than wheat—"

Sazarf explained carefully as to not make it obvious that he was repeating what Ikuta had told him. Various sounds escaped the high ranking officers' mouths.

"Poor man's barley… I've heard they eat it up in the north."

"Due to its image as food of Shinark tribe, it is looked down on in the Empire. However, it does not taste bad at all. You could roast it, or dry the powder to make a bread. It also helps the next plant to grow even better in crop rotation."

There was also the advantage of being able to be used as animal feed, but considering psychological aspects, that point was left out. Sazarf felt that the high ranking officers' responses were not bad either.

"… We'll review the merits of the crop after calling an expert over. But the Empire's eastern territory is not too far away from the

border with the Kioka. To let Shinark tribe, who had just rebelled not too long ago, frankly wouldn't the soldiers on frontlines be worried about their rear?"

"So, I'll return to my original question. Could you entrust one regiment to me?"

Since the conversation flowed this way, there was nobody who was commenting that he was stepping out of line. General Remion seemed lost deep in thought for several seconds before opening his mouth.

"Military administers production of military supply near the frontlines… That is an expanded dissemination of military affairs, but considering we are at state of war, that does seem like a natural progression. Furthermore, the fact they double as surveillance on Shinark tribe is commendable."

"T, thank you."

"But, there are still problems. It's the Empire's tradition that a command of a regiment is normally reserved for Colonels and above, with Lieutenant Colonel at the lowest. Considering you are not even officially a Major yet, I cannot entrust such a grave task to you."

That was an obstacle that had already been anticipated. Sazarf swayed his head.

"I only need to be included in the regiment as a negotiating window with the Shinark tribe. I do not need to be in charge of the regiment… No, I've only ever commanded up to a battalion. For someone like me, that duty is too heavy.

The last part of that sentence was something that was off script and from deep within his heart. Sazarf continued onto the high ranking officers who were frowning.

"Considering the experience and record, I recommend Colonel Mirtog Tetzirich for the job."

When the name of someone not present came out, everyone was taken aback.

"The Empire's south-western province, Ebodolk province regiment's commander, Colonel Mirtog Tetzirich…"

General Remion probably understood why that man was designated. After a moment of consideration, he turned towards the red-haired general who kept his silence until now.

"What do you think, marshal?"

His lips moved slightly and it did not take much time for the baritone voice to come out.

"If there is no other recommendation, then he should be considered."

Upon hearing an answer that essentially confirmed the appointment, corners of Sazarf's mouth twitched. He did not anticipate it to actually go through.

Though he was here for that express purpose, Ikuta was the one who had come up with the content of negotiation, so Sazarf did not have much confidence in himself. He had imagined being scorned by all the high ranking officers and kicked out of the meeting.

"Ah, ah, there is one more suggestion."

He could not breath easy yet. In some way, the most important part had yet to be brought up.

"I request I and the five from the "Knightly Order" be posted under the command of Colonel Tetzirich."

"… I thought your request would include something like that."

General Remion looked at Sazarf with chilly jade eyes and talked with slightly mocking tone.

"We will take your recommendation as the candidate in this case, but I will give you an advice… Being foolish or being too smart is not conducive for your own good. I thank you for an excellent ideas, but carrying them out is our job. You do not need to plan so deep into it."

"… I, I understand."

Sazarf had no intention to rebuke a comment telling him to know his place. He already felt the dangers of his situation while discussing with the high ranking officials utilizing borrowed words as his weapon.

"Also, your conversational skill is well developed, but without suitable class. Proposing an unreasonable request first and when an opposing argument comes out, fill out your own argument with logical reason… It makes harder for those who feel they do not understand your true intent to join in. Although it is effective in seizing the initiative in a situation like this."

Sazarf wholeheartedly agreed while blaming the black haired boy on the inside.

'Oi, Lieutenant Ikuta, why is it always my job to get reprimanded to get a request to go through.'

"Nonono, I think it's amazing! Very very amazing, of course!"

The voice that rang out almost annoyingly well chimed in again without caring for the situation. Flapping the khaki clothing,

symbolizing the highest civil administrative position of chancellery, the owner of the voice stood up.

“All of you are too hard headed! You should take Major Sazarf’s example to hold more flexible meetings! You can’t be hemmed into a pattern of military or internal affairs. You should not be afraid to cross the boundary! You CANNOT be afraid to CROSS the BOUNDARIES! It’s so important, I had to say it twice. Fufufufu.”

Sazarf was at loss for words. To say something so outrageous in front of these people, he wondered what was wrong with the man.

“Only when there is close collaboration between the military and the internal affair can we escape this peril! Isn’t it obvious? I am saddened! I am saddened to see you discuss this bound by the cage of military! I am always prepared to extend my helping hand.”

The man shouted while holding himself tight with his two hands. The exaggerated tone akin to some tragic hero in a play sounded more eerie as he went on. It was because there was not even a hint of sincerity in those words.

“… Sit down, Chancellor Trisnai. No one here intended to distress you.”

“You lie again! General Remion always speaks the kindest lies.”

“I never lied. But Chancellor, did you look back on why you’re here? The reason you are allowed to attend here is to record the court martial and the meeting, not to voice your opinion. Even if you’re the chancellor of the Empire, please refrain from speaking when you have no authority.”

General Remion maintained respectful expression, but his voice was steeped in annoyance and obvious outrage. It was not something

that had developed overnight. It was an old and dark feelings closer to a grudge.

"If the Emperor was here, would the general say the same thing? Could you say the Emperor should keep quiet since this is a military meeting? Definitely not! I'm not a mere scribe, but attending here on behalf of the Emperor! To extend his heart out to all of you despite being ill. Why do you not understand that?"

Skinny yet lean body, and lush grey hair that gleamed showed youth that did not match someone who was 42 years of age. There were even some who whispered that he was sucking the Emperor's life energy away.

The Empire's Chancellor Trisnai Izanma. The head of the corrupt nobles that leached in the palace. In the current state when the Emperor was unable to carry out his duties, this sly fox was essentially sitting on the throne of the Katvana Empire.

Sazarf could almost hear the silent screams of "you damn weasel" from the high ranking officers. But the man spoke on without any care for the pressures and kept dropping the Emperor's name whenever possible.

"Well, well, then Major Sazarf—."

Sazarf went rigid after being named. Trisnai stood up and walked all the way over to the side where Sazarf was sitting while never stopping to talk.

"As expected of the hero of the Northern War. You seem to have keen mind outside strategy. And to be so knowledgeable about crops as well! My, for someone so exceptional to have spent time in such an unfortunate environment like the north! I can't quite believe it. This matter alone gives the Imperial Army something to reflect upon."

The fox continued talking like a spring that kept spewing out water while approaching closer to Sazarf. Different kind of tension turned his body rigid and he could feel the fox's muggy gaze.

"But—there is one thing I want to confirm. Did you really come up with everything by yourself?"

Sazarf's heart jumped.

'Calm down. Calm down. Him testing you out like this isn't beyond what you expected.'

"… No, Chancellor, your honour. I did not come up with all by myself."

"Heh—?"

"It's an idea I've collaborated together on with very capable subordinates. It should be said it's the entire staff's idea. I simply feel the duty as the one who negotiated with the chieftain of the Shinark tribe to reach a comprehensive and mutually beneficial solution."

"Of course, of course. Then which one of the subordinates was the one who proposed to protect the refugees under the plan of producing the military supply?"

"Well, who was it again… I believe that person read something similar in an older document. I can't remember the person clearly. As for the corn, that was my idea. I've eaten in many times during my time in the north."

Sazarf brushed over the question without many specifics. Truthfully, he wanted to say "there is this arrogant kid under my command and it was all his idea", but it was not part of the deal Sazarf had made and he focused on being the shield to them best he could.

"Fuuuuhm… Well, I guess it can't be helped."

He could not gloss things over any more than that and thankfully the questions stopped. But while Sazarf was feeling relieved on the inside, the next strike came.

“But… fufufu, you came prepared with quite the hand. Taking this opportunity to not only protect the refugees, but the “Knightly Order” as well… the 3rd princess shows significant favour towards them, and you as their superior officer, will soon have twin connections in both the military and the internal affairs as well.”

The face with a fissure like smile glanced over from below him. Sazarf felt like a prey wrapped by a snake, trembling in anticipation of his fate.

“Moreover, a regiment is like its own country internally… With your own source of supply like the Shinark tribe, it’d be more like your own kingdom. A perfect ground to grow your ambitions… No, perhaps your ambitions have already grown enough and this is only a step in realizing your—”

General Remion harshly slammed his fist on the desk. Realizing it was the time to back off, Trisnai distanced away from his prey.

“Enough, Chancellor! It’s not something that is of your concern! It’s exactly to prevent something like that, Colonel Migtor Tetzirich was recommended!”

“Yes, yes. Of course. But, General, one of my role is to keep an eye on any soldier going beyond their authority…”

“… Then why aren’t you taking properly care of the internal affair! If you have the courage to say you can solve the Shinark tribe refugee issue, then state your plan in detail! How many months had it been since the Assembly was gathered? Shouldn’t situation like this call for an emergency meeting!”

“Oh-ho, mymy, mymymy! General, should that statement be taken as interference into internal affairs? No, most certainly not! The military and internal administration must be separated and clearly defined to function healthily!”

“… Kuk! Even as you said there must be closer collaboration just seconds ago-!”

The General tried to stand up in outrage, but the Marshal stopped him with one hand.

“Both of you, sit down. Any more argument will be taken as an act of trying to disrupt the meeting.”

The General gritted at the emotionless voice. The polite outer shell cracked and true feelings spurted out.

“No, the one disrupting everything is his very existence! Sol, you still haven’t…!”

In the second warning, there was sharpness that indicated there will not be a tolerance for another outburst. Trisnai hurried back to his seat and General Remion sat back down with a bitter expression. Sazarf, who was not included in the two of them, could not sit down and kept sweating profusely.

“Major Senpa Sazarf.”

Sazarf straightened up automatically after being named. Marshal Igsem cold heartedly gave out an order to the man who wanted to escape the situation even one second faster to save his own life.

“I will summarize the proposal. Repeat again from the beginning.”

Clang. The sound of mugs hitting each other and “cheers” rang out in unison.

The droplets of liquid flew in the air. The soldiers liberated from the long days of war were indulging their happiness in drinking, eating and talking with their comrades. The mood in the feast hall grew without knowing the bounds.

It was inevitable. Everyone here knew that it was the privilege of the living only too well within their heart. There were already countless many whom they would never exchange drink with ever again.

“It’s heating up in here. How many plates did they break so far.”

In the corner seat, about a step away from the dividers, the five from the Knightly Order were surrounding a table.

“Haha, well, we should look over something like that.”

“Yeah. It’s been a long and difficult war. They’ll want to enjoy themselves now that it’s over.”

Torway and Matthew spoke while nodding. There were drinks and food sprawled on their table as well, but they did not eat or drink indiscriminately. The five were here as Duty Officers. This occasion was to show appreciation not only for themselves but for the soldiers’ hard works as well.

“Leeeuutenaaaant~! Leeeuutenant Ikut~ta~!”

Though they were restraining themselves, a group of soldiers came over with a drink in hand. The one at the head was Ikuta’s aide, Sergeant Suya. They all seemed quite drunk as all their face were red.

“Whaaaa~chya doing in a corner like this~! Come drink with us!”

“To be fair, I want to… But if I get drunk too, there’s not going to be anyone to take care of you all when you pass out.”

"What? Don't be foolish! What happened to your courage from when you tried to seduce my mom?"

Laughter burst out amongst the soldiers. Considering she brought such a topic up for joke despite the feast having started not too long ago, she must have been quite drunk. Or did it indicate a change in her heart.

"Go and drink with them Ikuta. Not too much though."

As the boy kept trying to ward off the drunkard, Yatori, who was sitting right beside, whispered to him. Ikuta glanced over slightly at her.

"You remember fighting with her about the decision to go save the Shinark tribe squad. Leaving us aside, she must still be feeling complicated about it and want to make up with you about it… It would be hard to do so while sober, so with little alcohol to help."

She was not someone who could not take a hint and neither was Ikuta. Rest of the members of the Knightly Order glanced as if saying 'It's fine, go with her', so he nodded and stood up.

"Al~right! Then your commander will drink with you… What? Only the palm wine in this bowl? No thank you for that. I want a beer, too. In a proper beer mug!"

Once allowed to go free, Ikuta went along with the crowd. He took the beer mug in hand and drank the content in one shot. The subordinates cheered wildly at the scene. Being able to fire up the mood was one of his strong suit.

"Puah… Here, Yatori! You drink, too."

"Uh, me too?"

"If we're going to make up, we should. Here, Suya, you too!"

The two Ikuta gave drinks to faced each other half-forcibly. The moment two of them were facing each other awkwardly, the black haired boy stood between them and shouted.

“For the goddesses of battle!”

With that phrase, Ikuta forcibly clanked his mug with the two of them. Yatori smiled bitterly and quietly said “cheers” and drank after clinking her mug with Suya. After a moment of hesitation, Suya quickly followed suit. As Ikuta heated up the atmosphere with his subordinates like that, two new people approached the table where three of the members of the Knightly Order were left behind. One was Captain Sazarf with an exhausted expression and the other was Princess Chamille who did her best to hide herself and not dampen the mood.

“Oh~ This is quite the party. Man, while I was the one going through all the troubles.”

Recognizing their superior officer and the princess, the three stood up immediately and saluted.

“Princess Chamille, Captain. It must have been hard.”

“Thank you for your hard works. How was the meeting with the command?”

Haro offered the words of consolation along with a cup filled with grape juice to the princess and a mug filled with beer for the captain respectively. Beside her, Matthew and Torway brought a chair each.

“You need not worry about me, so console the captain’s struggles.”

Sazarf took the mug, half-emptied it and slouched almost as if he was collapsing.

“You guys try that, too… Just sitting in that atmosphere alone is enough to drain you… Ah, I seem to have been promoted to major. Celebrate it. Celebrate it with all your might.”

“Congratulations” the three of their voice overlapped. Frankly they had already anticipated it, so it was not so surprising. Matthew asked several questions to the man slumped over the table in half-dead state.

“So, about that… How did it go?…”

“It seems to have barely passed. It’s not confirmed yet, but get in touch with your dad early.”

At that answer, Matthew crossed his arms with a complicated face. At the table where two more had joined, Yatori escaped the drunk crowd and returned.

“Thank you for your hard work, Captain. Your highness, shall I bring a drink for you?”

“Ah, Yatori. There is no need for—”

Princess Chamille stopped mid-speech. For the same reason, everyone had their eyes wide open as well. It was because Yatori’s face was red like a ripe tomato.

“… Puha! Hahahah! Lieutenant Yatori… were you weak with drinks?!”

The one who could not hold back and let out the first laughter was Sazarf. Torway and Haro barely held it in, but Matthew was the next one to reach his limit.

“I, I didn’t even notice… But, haha, man, your face is amazing! It’s as red as your hair!”

Yatori sighed before grumbling. She was not just red in cheeks, but her entire face was red as well. Especially since she usually acted so composed, this elicited even greater reaction.

“S, speaking of which, Yatori always drank quietly in a corner.”

“Yeah, it’s the first time I’ve seen her empty a mug in one go.”

Haro and Torway each showed their surprise. On the other hand, as if Captain Sazarf had a habit of laughing when drunk, it took a while to calm himself down. He was laughing continually with Matthew who seemed to take after him.

“… Ha, doesn’t matter. If it makes your drinks taste better, make fun of me however much you want.”

Being so generous instead of getting angry was like her. Princess Chamille, who recomposed herself after hearing those words casted a fierce gaze at Matthew and Sazarf, but it was like trying to put out a forest fire with only a bucket of water. The laughter continued.

“Hahaha, the only opponent that invincible close-combat master Yatori is weak to. It’s something called alcohol.”

Ikuta returned at inexplicable timing while being drunk to the boot. He slurred his words and swayed from side to side while walking. It was not as apparent on face as Yatori, but he was quite drunk.

“Well, unfortunately, she doesn’t drink more once drunk. Everytime I tried to get her to drink more to get something fun to happen, it ended in failure.”

“How can she win against someone like you who repeat drinking and throwing up all night long. You trying to start it up again tonight?”

“No, no, far from that. Since I’m the Duty Officer, I know being too drunk is dangerous.”

"I remember having to carry you out from various places more than once after you've blacked out saying similar stuff."

Yatori reminisced about the highschool days before shrugging. Looking at a conversation that only the two of them knew about and Princess Chamille and Torway who were looking at them with complicated expression—It was the usual.

"Ah~ Captain Sazarf. How did that business go?"

Ikuta asked while leaning back on on the chair and Sazarf did his best to straighten his breathing from all the laughter.

"Kukuku… Yeah, that, it'll probably pass. And I'm becoming a major! How about it? Aren't I great?"

"Congratulations. If it'll get passed, then that means…"

Ikuta stood up from leaning back against the chair and circled the table to stand behind Matthew. He leaned against Matthew's chubby body to speak excitedly.

"So that's how it is? I'll be relying on you in many ways, Matthew, my friend."

The moment he spoke, the laughter stopped. The moment Matthew understood what Ikuta had meant, his smile turned into shaken expression.

"… Is that how it'll go… Honestly, I'm not sure about this. I'm really not feeling sure about this."

The boy slouched his head and moaned. The drunkard behind him patted his head while speaking.

"No, no. I look forward to it already. It's not just anyone, but between you and me. I've always been thinking we should go visit one day."

Excited at the prospect, Ikuta spoke loudly with a mug in hand.

"The time has come! Now, let's all go back to Matthew's house!"

Chapter 1:

The Ebodolk Province Incident

Part 1

The Ebodolk province situated in the southwest of the Empire was different from the rest of the nation as it was humid and warm all year long. Hence, their way of life was different from the other provinces too.

「Wahh! Amazing, it's an entire farm field! This is the first time I have seen that!」

As she watched the scenery flashing by the carriage window, Haro cheered forthrightly. Compared to the other provinces that mainly grow wheat, the vast sceneries of farmlands were the symbol of Ebodolk province.

The air that was untouched by the dust was adequately humid, and the wind had the scent of fertile soil in them. Clean water flowed in the ditches beside the road, and there were frogs and fishes swimming leisurely in them. When think back of the dried and cracked land to the north, this scene felt really soothing.

「Hmm, the Kuna rice is growing well… I heard the harvest had been poor in recent years, but from the looks of things, the situation had improved a lot.」

Princess Chamille said with the expression of a ruler. However, the youth who should have reacted quickly to her had turned silent as

they reached the end of their journey via carriage. The princess glanced at him sideways, as she sighed.

「……Matthew, I know you have plenty on your mind with regards to this situation, but leaving all that aside, you are coming back home after a long trip away. Your parents would want to see the energetic face of their son returning from the battlefield, right?」

「…… Yes, it's as Your Highness says. But…」

「If you have any concerns, do tell me right now. I will try to do something about if I'm able to help.」

Aside from Sazarf who was riding in another carriage, the gaze of all five other passengers fell onto Matthew. Matthew sighed and scratched his cheeks.

「I'm not sure if it is really a concern… But if things kept going this way, all of us might be assigned to the new Regimental unit under the command of my father…」

「Yes, that will probably happen. And of course, the Ebodolk province would also need to arrange for the successor to Colonel Mirtog Tetzirich. Right now, the younger brother of the colonel, Lieutenant Colonel Zenbaruca Tetzirich, who is also acting as his subordinate, is a potential candidate.」

「It had already been decided that Uncle Zenba will take over the unit, so it's fine for that to happen a little earlier… As for my dad, the sudden assignment before his imminent retirement is probably a surprise. But I already explained to him how all this happened, so he probably won't turn us down.」

「Then what are you worried about…?」

「… If Dad is taking up a post in another place, then Mom would follow him too. I'm not sure how to put this, but my Mom–」

The carriage braked suddenly mid sentence. Yatori quickly covered the princess who was floating above her seat because of the momentum, and the other four also pushed against the wall of the carriage to keep themselves from falling over.

「What happened!?」

Yatori asked the driver loudly, and a panicked reply came immediately:

「There… There is a cow charging across the road…! It almost hit us!」

When they heard the term 「cow」, the members of the knights corp looked at each other. It wasn't an attack by bandits or something, but everyone here were important personnel, so they couldn't let down their guard. After letting Haro take care of the Princess, the other four people started moving to confirm the situation.

「Full alert! Be careful of enemies hiding in the crops field. Matthew, Torway, search for the enemy from the left and right carriage windows!」

「Okay!」 「Understood!」

Ikuta gave out instructions immediately, and there was no hesitation in their responses. The naivety of recruits were gone from them. Unlike before, they had overcome the harsh battlefield of the northern rebellion.

Matthew and Torway opened the windows they had closed earlier, and observed the surroundings from the tiny gaps. At the same time,

they armed their Sprite onto the barrel of their Air Shooter, and fed it a bullet. They reported back quickly.

「... No signs of the enemy to our right!」 「Same with the left! To be safe, I will lay down covering fire... Huh? Ahh... That's...?」

Torway sounded confused. Yatori who had her hands on the hilt of her swords and guarding the entrance listened carefully to any sound outside as she asked:

「Torway, what do your elf eyes see?」

「... There... There's a cow attacking a person... No, a person is attacking the cow...?」

The youth who used a lot of effort to describe what he was seeing continue to stutter:

「... There is a beserk large cow in the field, and it is battling a person. That person... seems to be a woman...」

「Huh? A woman?... Shit! Could it be!?」

Matthew who heard that report quickly left the right window and moved to the other side, making space beside Torway to look outside. Yatori judged from the report that 「someone is being attacked by a mad cow」 and was about to jump out of the carriage when the slightly plump youth stopped her.

「W-Wait, Yatori. You don't need to go there...!」

「... But why? Isn't someone being attacked by a cow?」

「Anyway, it will be fine... There don't seem to be any enemies around, so open the door and see for yourself.」

Matthew stated in a strangely exhausted tone, so Yatori took a look outside as instructed by him. To the left of the carriage was the corner of a wide field, where a well built cow, probably used for farming, was rampaging. However, what surprised Yatori was–

「Alright alright, stop messing around! You are a really naughty kid!」

A woman was suppressing the fierce cow from the front, and grabbing both its horns. She was tall and big for a woman, and had broad shoulders. She was wearing a brown one piece working clothes and a green work apron.

「Woahh, how heroic…」

Ikuta who was watching beside Yatori muttered with his eyes sparkling. Everyone expressed their agreement wordlessly. Although that woman was dressed like an aunt who was tilling the fields, she put up a intense fight against the cow five times her size.

「It's about time for you to quiet down! Hyaaah!」

Probably judging that the match couldn't be decided with a straight up fight, that woman jumped, with mud still sticking onto her feet, and grabbed onto to that cow. She then put the cow into a headlock, and strangled it with all her might.

「Uuuuwaaaaahhhhhh!」

That cow continued to struggle despite this situation. Shortly after, it lost its strength, bending its forelegs and sitting down in the field.

The woman looked at her panting opponent with merciful eyes, then stroked the neck of the cow.

「Alright, have you cool off now? Feeling better venting it all out?」

It wasn’t clear if the cow was exhausted or knew that resistance was futile, it just sat there obediently. The knights corps members judged that the incident had been resolved, and left the carriage.

A group of farmers that were dressed similarly to the woman who suppressed the cow came to her. They all lowered their head in gratitude. The woman smiled kindly and shook her head. The cow was leased and stood up a little while later, and was taken away docilely.

「Great～ It’s all settled now, right? I should go back to work too– Hmm…?」

At this moment, the woman finally noticed the group standing beside the field and looking at her. She narrowed her eyes to observe them, and quickly brightened up.

「––Matthew! Ara ara! You are finally back–!」

The woman leap from the field, and charged at full speed along the path between the farms. She was as intimidating as that cow which shocked Ikuta and the others. The youth who had been called by his name took a step forward with a face of resignation.

「Yes, I’m home Mom– Uwahh!」

「Hahahaha! It’s great that you are home safely, my son! Do you have legs? Are you a ghost! You little brat!」

「Whoooaaaa!」

The helpless Matthew became the sacrifice of a passionate hug. His body was constricted by a force that made a cow surrender, and his bones started to creak.

「I was just thinking that I haven't heard from you for so long, then the war broke out in the north! Do you know how worried I was when even you got sent to the frontlines!?」

「M-Mom… I know, I really do…! So let me go… I will die…!」

Matthew's scream sounded genuine. Locked in her vise-like arms, his waist had turned incredibly slender.

「W… What…? What's happening…?」

Sazarf who alighted from the carriage in front of them was stunned by this scene. Aside from the two person in question, the others simply looked at the long awaited reunion between mother and son with their mouth open.

「Ara, I'm so happy! My son brought so many friends back with him!」

After taking off her one piece working clothes and putting on a normal one piece dress, and changing her work apron for a normal apron, the woman started busying herself between the kitchen and dining table. The six passengers in the carriage and Sazarf all sat in their chairs, and watched the dining table being set in a short amount of time.

「And there are three cute girls! I wonder which one will become our daughter-in-law, I'm looking forward to it! Isn't that right, hubby!?」

「Hanna, I know you are happy that Matthew came home, but calm down a little. The Third Princess has graced us with her visit… Isn't that right?」

A middle aged man sitting in the seat of honour on the host side stopped the woman who had been chattering nonstop. He was

Colonel Mirtog Tetzirich of the Imperial Army, his round face and slightly chubby body resembles Matthew a lot.

「Hmm, are you saying Her Highness will marry into our family? That will be incredible, what will happen to our family registry!?」

As for Colonel Mirtog's wife Hanna Tetzirich, both her appearance and forthright personality didn't suggest any blood relations with Matthew. Even when she spoke to her husband, she laid out the utensils with movements that didn't feel messy, and moved around to pour drinks for everyone.

「The ominous feeling turned true… No, I didn't expect it to be subverted in the first place…」

The subject Matthew himself hugged his head and laid on the table. For everyone, it was embarrassing for their friends to see their family situations, but the strong personality of the mother had even overwhelmed the guests. In fact, the group couldn't even find the chance to make social small talk.

The seven of them were led by Hanna to the Tetzirich house, which was erected on a hill that could could oversee the surroundings, and the grandiose architecture befitted the status of a famous military house since times of old. The three storey high building was built with stones, and the courtyard within its outer walls had several wells, gardens, stables and barns for livestocks. Maybe it could be fortified in an emergency? Just the facilities inside could feed the people inside for quite a long time.

「Alright, it's done! Eat up! You didn't get to eat proper meals during the war, correct?」

First was giant slabs of lamb chop roasted with herbs, followed by a giant pot of rice piled up like a hill, that was definitely more than ten

portions. The strong aroma of spices filled the air. Although they had not gone through the formal greetings yet, they couldn't do anything before finishing their meal. Filling the stomachs of the guests seemed to be Hanna's way of welcoming them.

「Ughh! Delicious ! Mama Matthew, this is yummy!」

Was there any doubt about this? The first to dig in was Ikuta. He bit into the lamb chest meat with bones, then used a spoon to scoop up a large quantity of rice onto his plate, and then into his mouth. Just seeing the way he ate was enough to make the others hungry, and affecting them.

「Then… I will be digging in.」 「It's a rare chance, so I will…」

Haro and Torway also started eating. When they sent the food into their mouth, their eyes started to shine.

「… Uwah! It's true! This rice is delicious〜」

「Yes! The mutton is good too, but the rice that had absorbed the essence of the mutton taste even better!」

Princess Chamille glanced sideways at them eating, but couldn't find the chance for her to reach for the food. Sensing that, Yatori gently placed the food that had been distributed onto small plates before the Princess.

「Please have a taste too, Your Highness.」 「Ah… yes, thank you Yatori…」

She was probably hungry after the long journey. Once she start eating, the Princess didn't stop. Yatori tended to the girl in all sorts of ways and started dining too. And so, the dinner started getting rowdy before they realised it.

「Hmm… ughh… Matthew, why didn't you tell us earlier that you have such a wonderful mother…」

「That's exactly the reason! She is the type you like, correct?!」

「As expected of Matthew, you really know me. That's right, it has been years since my heart is moved like this.」

Ikuta stopped eating and stared at Hanna with a passionate and mesmerizing gaze. Matthew who sensed danger from that action grabbed Ikuta from the side, and said in a vicious tone:

「Hey… If you dare lay your hands on my Mom in the future… You will definitely be shot in the back in the next war…」

「Thank you for the most murderous warning you had ever given me. I will keep it in mind, my dear friend Matthew.」

Besides the two noisy youths, Colonel Mirtog had started socializing with Sazarf who was seated closest to him. Sazarf couldn't help cursing that such a task had to fall to him.

「My son has been in your care, Major Senpa Sazarf.」

Sazarf accepted a drink poured by Colonel Mirtog flusteredly and said:

「No, I can't take the merit of having taken care of your son… In the series of harsh battles, he has fought on til the very end.」

Sazarf took the bottle, and pour a glass for the host. Colonel Mirtog replied with a smile:

「You don't have to be so humble, I have also heard about the terrible conditions on the battlefield. Since he has returned with all

limbs intact after the foray at the foremost frontlines, it must be his luck of meeting a good superior.」

「... The same goes for me too, I'm lucky to have good subordinates.」

Sazarf stated what he truthfully thinks in self mockery, and Colonel Mirtog tilted his head as if he didn't quite understand.

「... You are not saying pleasantries, right? I'm surprised by how low you evaluated yourself. I heard you are the hero of the northern rebellion, so I imagined you to be a more confident man.」

「I'm sorry for disappointing you... But speaking of heroes, the soldiers who fought until the very last moment in the retreating battle deserves that title more than me.」

Sazarf said as he thought back of his many subordinates who fell in battle. Colonel Mirtog also understood the heavy meaning behind his words, and the two of them raise a glass for the soldiers who had fallen in the Grand Arfatra Mountains.

「You might have to accept a troublesome request this time...」

Sazarf wanted to open his speech with an apology, but Colonel Mirtog stopped him kindly.

「Let's leave that for later. Let's dine for now, Major Sazarf.」

「Ermm... But...」

「My wife is really happy to see my son return safely, I feel the same too. I hope you can leave the other matters aside for now, and accept my pure gratitude. Will that be alright?」

Since he put it that way, Sazarf couldn't turn him down. The two of them clinked their glasses again with a different mindset. At this moment, Colonel Mirtog suddenly showed a stiff face.

「... But there is one thing I need to ask now, Major.」

「Yes, what would you like to know?」

The serious atmosphere made Sazarf sat up straight. The Colonel leaned in close and whispered:

「So, about my son... out of the three of them, who is he closest too?」

The Colonel stole glances at Yatori, Haro and Princess Chamille as he asked. Sazarf had to used all he had to suppress the sudden urge to laugh.

He exerted strength in his abdomen to suppress the urge to laugh as he felt how funny this superior officer in front of him was– *He is a father too...* Sazarf thought.

After dinner, everyone rested for about an hour before the meeting began officially in the drawing room.

「... So he used the production of military logistics as the reason to hire the Shinaak as farmers? I see...」

After hearing Sazarf explain the whole story, the Colonel crossed his arms and appeared to be deep in thought.

「I think this is a good proposal... But you really took on a troublesome task. It should be much simpler to declare that this isn't under your purview and ignore the problem, correct?」

Sazarf smiled awkwardly, while Ikuta who was seated to his right shook his head quietly.

「In the refugee camps to the southern part of the northern zone, the Shinaak tribes are shivering because of their uncertainty of the future, and their only hope is promise their chieftain Nanak Dar made with us. If we abandon them now, then our actions would be no different from what Lieutenant General Safida had done.」

Ikuta looked at the base of his pinkie finger that had been cut off for that promise– the wound had healed, but there was still lingering pains, which made his emotions tensed.

After quite some time of silence, Princess Chamille used this chance to speak:

「As for the political issues and the dispute in the place where the new Regiment will be based in, I can promise to resolve them within the limits of my status. My apologies for asking you to leave the land you have resided in for a long time… But can you accept this proposal, Colonel Mirtog?」

「……」

「It's hard to say this, but there really aren't anyone else who can take your place. It has to be an officer has a good track record in managing a Regiment, and can reign in the Shinaak tribe who are hostile to outsiders– these are already tall orders. And this time, there is another problematic condition.」

At this point, the Princess looked at everyone who had gathered here.

「After numerous prominent battles, the 『Knight Corps』 has become an important political existence. The situation can be explained in a personal level too… But the issue that requires special attention is the fact that members of the Igsem and Remeon houses are in the same unit.」

Torway shifted his gaze to the flame haired girl who was sitting in the guest seat opposite him. At the same time, he thought about the additional star added to his rank epaulette not too long ago.

「Even if this is mostly a coincidence, it is also a sign that the imperial army has reached an equilibrium, showing the balance between the Igsem and Remeon factions. Torway's promotion to Lieutenant not long ago was probably done with this situation in mind.」

Colleagues in the same unit and the same rank. The two person in question already understood that this was what the entire military was happy to see... Despite the complicated feelings in their hearts.

「And the next problem is, who will manage this group. If a soldier from the Igsem or Remeon faction is in charge, that will upset the balance. The superior officer of the 『Knight Corps』 has to be a firmly neutral party.」

Everyone focused their gaze on Colonel Mirtog. Yes, that was the second reason.

「There is no other candidate except you, Colonel Mirtog. You maintained a rarely seen sense of balance, and didn't get absorbed by either factions. The strong willed Tetzirich house, the famed military family that had remained unchanged since the turbulent days of old... This sense of neutrality has even earned the trust of the Marshal and the General. Only you can take the Knight Corps under your command without unnerving anyone.」

Colonel Mirtog did not show unnecessary humbleness towards such an evaluation. The Princess was right, similar to the Igsem taking pride in their swordsmanship and the Remeon in their marksmanship, the Tetzirich took pride in their neutrality.

「And of course, it’s not just the five members of the 『Knight Corps』, there is also the issue of what to do with myself who is closely related to them, as well as the hero of the northern rebellion, Major Sazarf. These are also problems for the higher-ups. That is why we hope you can shoulder all these responsibilities in one shot.」

「……」

「I know this is a shameless request, and I’m also humbled by own my powerlessness… However, can you consider it? Not for us, but for the thousands of Shinaak refugees who are still living a harsh life inside tents…」

The Princess got up from her chair and wanted to lower her head to plead her case, but Ikuta suddenly got up and grabbed the defenceless back of the girl’s head with both hands. This reckless move made Colonel Mirtog open his eyes wide.

「Hyaa…! S-Solork… What are you doing…!?」

「I know you want to express your sincerity, but don’t lower your head so easily, Princess. Under such circumstances, if the Princess lowers her head, then Colonel Mirtog would be forced into a corner.」

After understanding what Ikuta was implying, the Princess sat down again with her face flushed. Their interaction was so unexpected that Colonel Mirtog was momentarily dumbfounded.

Using the chance when the conversation had stopped for the moment, Hanna walked into the room with a large jug full of grape juice in one hand.

「It’s fine, just accept it, hubby.」

She refilled the empty glasses as she expressed her opinion.

「Or rather, you have no reason to turn them down, correct? While we are living peacefully in our homes, these children are risking their lives in the frontlines.」

Colonel Mirtog nodded firmly, while Princess Chamille felt uneasy. Because she was the only one who didn't deserve the compliment of 「risking her live in the frontlines」.

「Even though there are issues they had no choice but to bring back with them, we should step up and take care of these trivial matters. Make up your mind already, there are just 4,000 Shinaak refugees, correct? We can take all of them in.」

Hanna claimed that there were just 4,000 tribe of another race, her boldness made Colonel Mirtog smiled wryly. The cautious husband and the wife pushing him from behind– maybe this was how this wedded couple got along.

「… It is as my wife said. Personally, I want to just take on this mission without a second thought.」

The Colonel drank all of the refilled juice, then turned to the Princess again:

「… However, I have the obligation of managing the military personnels of this province, so my station doesn't allow me to answer so easily. For now… Please give me some time to consider this.」

It was getting late, and the meeting was adjourned for now. The Princess and her entourage were brought to their own quarters, and spent the night on a warm and clean bed which was an impossible luxury on the battlefield.

However, a few hours later. Someone woke up before the break of dawn, and got off his bed quietly.

「Phew… It’s about 3am now? Anyway, no one else should be awake…」

「What’s the matter, Matthew? It’s too early to be up.」

In the dim room, the old wooden bed used since the last generation and the cupboard took up half the floor space. The sprite Tsuu who was resting inside a basket beside the bed got up when it noticed its master was moving. The slightly chubby youth looked back at his partner.

「I had to get up earlier, or I would be stopped. Alright, let’s get going.」

Matthew who had gotten up swiftly changed his clothes and left his room with Tsuu. He walked as quietly as he could to the first floor, made a detour to the kitchen and packed two meals worth of food into his bag, then exited from the back door.

He first went to the stables located near the manor. The almost 20 horses in the stables woke up one by one, and Matthew quickly shushed them. Before long, he found his target horse and went near with a smile.

「It’s been so long, Narun. Do you remember me?」

Matthew reached his hand out, and the brown horse leaned its head over as if in answer to his question. After enjoying the happiness of reuniting with his beloved horse for a while, he placed a saddle onto its back, let the horse bite into a rein, and brought it out of the stable.

「Alright, let’s go–!」

As Matthew was able to put his leg into the stirrup, someone tapped his shoulder suddenly.

「Where are you going, my dear friend?」

「... Huh?」

A familiar voice came from behind him. Matthew turned around with a scrounged face, and as expected, a black haired youth who was all smiles stood before him. There was also another youth who looked a little troubled standing beside him.

「You… You two… but why…?」

「I'm the one who asked first. This is troubling, Matthew, where are you going by yourself? And you even came to secure a horse, and packed lunches with you?」

「Sorry, Ma-kun… Ik-kun woke me up…」

Ikuta pressed Matthew for answers, while Torway sighed with a bitter smile. The pudgy youth ruffled his own hair with an expression of hatred.

「... I have something to attend to. It has been so long since I came back home, and I have a lot of things on my schedule.」

「So you need to ride somewhere far? Alright then~ we will accompany you. Don't need to thank us, we have time anyway.」

「You should let things rest during times like this… Ah~damn it, I even got up early to avoid this from happening.」

Matthew grumbled with a sour face, but gave up quickly this time. He sighed deeply, then pointed to the stables.

「… If you want to come with me no matter what, then hurry up and get a horse. I will be riding very fast, and will leave you behind if you can’t keep up.」

「I’m not confident at all, but I will do my best. So, which horse is the smartest and easiest to ride?」

「My house don’t have very difficult horses… but it’s best to avoid the 2nd and 7th horse from the right, and the 5th from the left, their personality is a little intense. Don’t take the innermost two either, they belong to my parents. The saddles and reins are over there–」

Matthew got onto his horse and gave pointers to the two who entered the stables. Before he stated where the horse riding equipment was, he realised suddenly that he could leave the two of them behind by spurring his horse ahead– but surprisingly, even after realising that, he didn’t execute this plan.

「… The saddles and reins are in the closet beside the entrance. Don’t take the old ones at the bottom, the splinters will hurt the horse’s ass.」

The three of them rode side by side in the fresh morning air, and the scenery of the lush farmlands flew right pass either side of their field of vision. They enjoyed the comfortness of the speed and started to chat:

「… I will be greeting the local residents around here. The farmers all get up early, so if you want to go somewhere further later, it won’t be too early too. That’s why, nothing interesting will happen even if you tag along.」

「If you are doing something boring, you don’t need to do so alone. Don’t worry about us, Matthew.」

Ikuta rode his horse with below average technique as he answered. Torway who was on the left and opposite side of Matthew also smiled:

「… I think it's interesting, Ma-kun. Think about it, this is the first time the three of us rode so far for something unrelated to missions or training. Riding alongside friends in an unknown land– just that is enough to fill me with excitement and anticipation.」

「I'm the only one who has returned to his hometown, so that's not fair… If you really think that way, then let's go to your place next time, Torway.」

「My place huh… of course it's fine, but unlike your house, my house isn't a place where you can relax. Ah, but my mother's cooking taste as good as Aunt Hanna's.」

「– Oh～ I feel intrigued, introduce your mother to me next time, ikemen. Ara～ to think I missed something so important. The origins of that irritatingly proper face is very likely from a beautiful woman!」

「Didn't I tell you not to hit on your friend's mother!? Hey Torway, don't ever bring this guy to your house, the rumoured tragedy that happened to the Mittokarifu house happen to you!」

As the group was squabbling, the horses they rode on continued galloping. Shortly after, the sun rose from the eastern horizon and banished the lingering darkness, bringing light to the earth.

「Wow…」

Torway was moved and sighed. The vast farm seems endless, and the brilliant light from the morning dew on the crops made them opened their eyes and watch the beautiful scene unfolding before them.

Even expressing their comments would spoil the mood, which made all three of them shut their mouth without being prompted to. Until this short moment of dawn ended, the three of them continued riding in silence.

「– Ara, aren't you the young master of the Tetzirich house!? It's been so long!」

「I heard about your exploits! To think that sniveling brat will return triumphantly as a knight!」

At every house and farm, Matthew would greet the local residents warmly and chat with them. Seeing how he was welcomed with smiles wherever he went showed the status of the Tetzirich house in this Ebodolk province.

「Ah! It's Matthew onii-chan! Erm, where is the gift from central?」

「I didn't prepare that stuff. It's just been a while, but you have grown, Kena.」

「No, even though his body has gotten bigger, he is still a kid inside. He will play around the whole day, and seldom help out in the fields.」

The father was smiling wryly, while Matthew looked surprised as he patted the head of the child running towards him. Ikuta and Torway dismounted a short distance away and watched this scenery.

「Ma-kun sure is popular, I'm not that close to the residents around my house.」

「Yes, it is a given that you will lose in terms of popularity at your hometown. After all the Tetzirich house has been stationed here since the era of strife.」

Torway nodded without surprised at Ikuta's analysis– as the 「The Three Loyal House」 which includes house Remeon returned their territory back to the emperor after the era of strife ended, there was a time when their bonds with their territory were broken. Although they were compensated with the rights to organize the national military, they had relinquished most of their influence over their old territories.

It was the same for the other famous military family of old, only the Tetzirich house was slightly different. Using the reason that they have very deep support of the local residents, they were permitted to continue staying in the land passed down from their ancestors. And of course, the number of soldiers garrisoned there were drastically reduced, and their status was relegated to that of soldiers assigned to this place on the orders of the military… But the fact was, for the past few centuries, the highest ranking commanding officer of the unit garrisonned in the Ebodolk province had always been a kin of the Tetzirich house.

「It might be true that they just wanted to protect the priviledge that had been passed down their family. But the amazing thing about the Tetzirich house is that they quickly abandoned their attitude as rulers, and adapted their way of life to match the prevailing style of the times… Even after the bureaucrats sent from central took over governing powers, they didn't do anything to gain more powers. They retreated to the sidelines as seniors with wealth of local governance experience, and lended aid to the troubled governing executive to make their presence more prominent.」

To Ikuta, this flexible and realistic attitude felt really pleasant. But did that mean he agree with this wholeheartedly? That wasn't true either. Leaving his personal preference aside, there are issues in other areas.

「… Maybe the Tetzirich house is too excellent as political consultants. They were too heavily relied on for all sorts of matters, which led to the actual governing officials forgetting their original duties. Although this isn't limited to just the Tetzirich house. Many high ranking military officers assigned to the various provinces in the Empire also ended up in the same situation… But even so, judging from the results, the way the Ebodolk province was managed in the past is already an indication of the Empire's future.」

The conversation turned into a monologue midway. When he realised that Torway beside him was opening his eyes wide from surprise, Ikuta got back to his senses. He shook his head to expel his thoughts, and Matthew who had finished his greetings just happened to come back.

「I'm done here too. The sun is already that high up, let's eat at the next place.」

「A wonderful proposal! So Matthew, did you include our lunch inside your bag?」

「Of course not, I was planning to act on my own.」

When he heard this answer, Ikuta looked so depressed that he collapsed onto the neck of the horse. The youth with a slightly bulging build didn't really care, but still lent a hand.

「… Never mind, the people we are visiting next would probably treat you to a meal. I had been in their care in the past too.」

「Where are we going next, Ma-kun? Another farm house?」

Matthew shook his head and pointed to the north:

「Over there is a factory for woven products. Women who couldn't protect their farm for various reasons… for example, widows all work there. It's lunch time, so if we visit…」

「Charge, my lovely stead! Full speed ahead!」

Ikuta didn't wait for Matthew to finish and gallop on ahead. Older woman and food, these two factors revived him instantly.

「Ah… Ik-kun…?」 「Hey… even if you go first, you don't know where it is!」

Seeing his figure growing smaller in the distance, Matthew and Torway also quickly push their horses to give chase.

After going north for about ten minutes, the destination appeared before them. It was a short and plain building built with planks. But as they got closer, Matthew's brow started to furrow.

「…? Ma-kun, there don't seem to be anyone here?」

Torway pointed out how things felt out of place. This building was very quiet. If there were many people working in there, it was strange for their voices and the sound of them working could not be heard outside.

「Hmm, this is weird. I don't think they will close the place to rest…」

Matthew tilted his head puzzledly, but still went around to the main entrance of the building. He got off the horse, pushed open the door, and– not just the workers, there wasn't any equipment or machinery at all, just a barren place.

「… This… How did…」

Matthew who walked in stood on the spot in a daze. Ikuta who followed surveyed the surroundings.

「Seeing how thick the dust on the floor is, this building wasn't deserted for just a couple of days. But not to the extent of several years either, probably about two to three months?」

「Even if you say that… there were many people working here.」

The mildly overweight youth couldn't believe his eyes, and wandered around the building, but there wasn't anything here. The only thing he could tell was that this factory was an abandoned factory.

With no other choice, the group left the building and wondered what to do. At this moment, the figure of a panting woman entered their field of vision. She was probably in her early thirties? She had a slender build and wore a blue worn out one piece dress, with a small bag on her shoulder. Matthew's face lit up immediately after seeing that woman.

「… Nee-san! Aren't you 米妮耶-nee!?」

「Huff… Puff… Ah, it's really Matthew. I'm glad that I made it, because I saw you riding over…」

「Long time no see. Well, I saw the inside of the factory… What happened? Nobody works there anymore? But why…」

The terribly confused Matthew raised several questions. The woman named 米妮耶 spent some time catching her breath, then answered him:

「… It's unfortunate, but the factory has closed down. That was two months ago, due to a lack of workers.」

「Lack of workers…? How could that be, there were so many people when I was here, it has always been so lively!」

「In the past three years, our colleagues had resigned one after another. This couldn't be helped, since the wages here was not enough to live on… there were many who disappeared without saying anything. Only me and a few experienced old ladies stayed until the very end, but we had all gone our separate ways now.」

「Did the wages fall drastically? I knew it was meagre, but it's not even a living wage…?」

米妮耶 looked at Matthew's sullen face directly.

「… From your reaction, Matthew hadn't heard yet, right? Let me tell you everything. The reason we couldn't live off our wages, isn't because the pay got cut drastically–」

Her dried lips told them what actually transpired, while Matthew and the three others listened to the detailed contents with stiff expressions.

「– A heavy poll levy?」 [1]

The Princess said with a stern expression. When Matthew and the others returned to the manor in the evening after visiting the locals, they gathered all their comrades into one of their rooms and held a meeting. The agenda was about the shut down of the factory they learned from 米妮耶.

「News of such hardship is too sudden. Has the residents of this province been levied with such heavy taxes that they can't even eat proper meals?」

Sazarf who was seated on the edge of the bed groaned. As this was a double room, even after bringing three chairs, they were all given to the girls. The boys sat on the two beds that were placed side by side.

「More accurately speaking, this was limited to the women. This 『poll tax』 has nothing to do with economic capability or tax tiers, but a fixed sum on every liable individual. I heard that all the women living in the Ebodolk province had to pay heavy taxes.」

Torway summarized the key points. Ikuta fell back onto a bed and said:

「Simply put, the target demographic for this tax are women. And the tax collection has been incredibly harsh, even forcing those living impoverished lives to the brink.」

「That… That's strange! I don't really understand economics, but taxes are levied for the sake of bettering society and make it easier to live in? If the tax collection is making the people starve, then that's putting the cart in front of the horse!」

Haro objected with furrowed brows. Matthew agreed with her indignant reaction, then crossed his arms and showed a face in deep thought.

「… I went to ask my dad about it just now. He knew about the heavy poll tax levied on the residents, and the closure of that factory… Or rather, the issues related to this heavy taxes is the reason why he is hesitant about leaving the Ebodolk province right now.」

「… I see. I also felt there was something holding him back, so its something like this.」

And this was had in turned bounded them too. The Princess nodded in understanding, and continued:

「– Since we know there is something obstructing Colonel Mirtog's path to reassignment, then now isn't the time to sit around and wait for answers. Furthermore, this problem is related to the governing executives… Looks like the personnel is decided. The only one who can interfere directly with the governance is me.」

After hearing Princess Chamille announced that so determinedly, the gazes of the others fell onto her.

「The executive governing officer of Ebodolk province– who is the chairperson of the governance executive council, an aristocrat of the Empire, Viscount Thezeni Hamatoll. The enactment or abolishment of all tax related matters are all vetoed by him. If we want to set a target, then we should start from him.」

「That means interfering with the governance of the province, can Your Highness actually do this?」

Yatori asked with concerned, and the Princess didn't give an immediate reply. She crossed her arms and didn't give an immediate reply, falling into deep thought.

「… Normally, this will be hard. The governor is an important official appointed by the Emperor to govern the provinces. Although his authority is much more restricted compared to the land lords of the past, but they have free reign to run certain aspects of the government, especially those of tax collection. Even if I tried to interfere with my authority as a royal, I would probably be laughed off. It will be a different matter if there are something I can use as bargaining chips.」

「You mean it's useless to strongarm him…」

「That can’t be helped. Even a poorly thought up law still have to be respected. If the establishment is overturned because of the words of an influential figure, then the political situation will fall into chaos.」

Princess Chamille placed the order of law as a precondition before evaluating the extent of her abilities.

「It all has to depend on the actual situation– that’s all I can say now. From what I have heard so far, I don’t think this policy is normal. But the local government has to carry out policies that is best for their own provinces, and can’t be overturned because an outsider came in and overrule them… If we investigate the current situation in the Ebodolk province, we can then understand the intentions of the governor, and if there is room for negotiation. That’s what we need to do first.」

Everyone nodded in agreement to this plan. As this issue happened to be her expertise, the Princess was more driven than usual. Ikuta looked at her from the front, and said in a serious tone:

「… It’s as the Princess says, of everyone here, you are the only one who can negotiate directly with the governor. We will do everything within our means to assist, but the key component will be handled by you.」

「… Yes!」

「It’s great that you understand that. The main character of this plan is you, so please work hard– and try to let me take it easy on the sidelines.」

After encouraging the Princess, Ikuta laid back down again. Despite looking calm, the Princess felt a little excited– After all, this is the first time that youth had entrusted something to her.

「First, I want to visit the actual scene. Can you tell me where the problem of this tax would be most prominent?」

The next morning. The group had gathered for breakfast, and the Princess who had spent a lot of time last night thinking about this problem before sleeping raise this topic. Her enthusiasm was clear could be seen clearly on her face.

「... Ah... Oh... Erm, well...」

For some reason, the key personnel Colonel Mirtog was hesitant to speak. The anxious Princess wanted to press him for an answer, but Ikuta spoke as if he was trying to drown out her voice.

「Ara～ the breakfast is marvelous too! Especially this rice congee, it's very delectable. The rice is brewed with milk and then raisins are added, I have never seen such a cooking method before.」

「Oh, this is a local cuisine. Because it is nutritious and easy to digest, you can eat it even if you don't have any appetite. When my son stopped being breastfed, we fed him this too.」

The topic was changed really quickly, and the Princess' request dissipated into thin air.

「There's no need to bring that up... Hey Ikuta, stop sucking up to my Dad and eat your food. Or else my Mom will keep getting you seconds.」

Matthew said with a sigh. At this moment, Hanna also came in from the kitchen, and added three rather large chunks of sausage into her son's plate that was almost empty.

「There are still meat, congee and fruits! Eat up, everyone!」

「Ah... No... I'm already...」

The Princess who was almost full wanted to turn her down, but her subtle gestures didn't get conveyed to the other party. With several thuds, her plates were filled with freshly grilled sausages and reheated vegetables.

「Your Highness is still growing, you won't get bigger if you don't take in more nutrition!」

Hanna said as she went around the table and replenish the food on everyone's plates. The size of the portion made her panic, but Princess Chamille who think that it was proper etiquettes to finish her food could only steel herself and pick up her spoon.

「Ugghh… this hurts…」

As expected, there were quite a few people who couldn't move because they ate too much. Princess Chamille, Torway and Sazarf laid on the couches on the drawing room, with Yatori tending to the Princess while Haro attended to the other two.

「Your Highness, are you alright? If you feel really unwell, we can let Haro prescribe you some stomach medicine.」

「No… No need, it's not that serious… But I can't accept this… Haro and you ate as much as me, right? Aside from me the petite me, two grown men also become like this, so why are you two fine?」

With the Princess looking at her with suspicious eyes, Yatori coughed with an 「Ahem.」 nonchalantly, while Haro laughed vaguely with a 「Ahaha」. In other words, that was the reason.

「Yatori and Haro are big eaters. Ahh~ that's nice.」

Ikuta intentionally said without any tact. He has been stuffing some food from a basket into his mouth since just now. It was a dessert

made by deep frying rice and sprinkling it with sugar. It was meant to be eaten as snacks with tea, but Ikuta asked Hanna to give him some.

「I don’t want to hear that from you. You have gone beyond having a big appetite to eating indiscriminately.」

「If you are talking about eating bugs, that’s just the difference in food culture.」

The youth answered confidently. Princess Chamille continued laying down on Yatori’s lap and interjected:

「Solork… why did you interrupt me during breakfast?」

「I’m just smoothing the scenes. Because the Colonel is troubled, and the atmosphere would get awkward if I leave things be.」

「Yes, I noticed your intentions. But I don’t understand what I was doing that troubled the Colonel. He seemed to be really bothered when I asked him to tell me which place is affected by the increase in levy the most– What’s so inappropriate about asking that?」

When the youth saw the sincere eyes of the Princess who was seeking answers, he stopped eating and turned around. At this moment, Yatori already knew how things would play out, and sighed as she continued watch things unfold. Ikuta started explaining with a smug face:

「You will understand if you follow everything to its logical conclusion– First, the only problem in Ebodolk province right now is the heavy poll tax levied against women, right?」

「Yes.」

「But in principle, the management of the taxes are done by using families as a unit. I think the Princess already knows this, but do you know the rationale behind this?」

「It's simply because it's more effective to do it this way, correct? For example, in a family of four with two parents and two adult children, not everyone can earn enough income. Hence, the most typical situation would be the father who is the pillar of the family will be their primary breadwinner, while the others supplement the family with their earnings, correct? Then the tax collector should do so by using families as a unit— so taxing the income of the father who is the bread winner will be less of a hassle, and minimise mistakes.」

「That is correct. But for the earlier example, the burden of the 『levy imposed specifically on women』 would be shared by both husband and wife, and will be no different from just a simple tax increase.」

「That's true... At least they won't be affected too much by the 『levy imposed specifically on women』.」

As expected of Princess Chamille, her speed of understanding things were incredible and praiseworthy. However, some ideas were stuck because of things aside from intelligence. Ikuta slowly showed his malicious face and continued:

「For the women in such families with good income, this tax isn't too bad. On the flip side, who will be affected the worst by this tax?」

「The first thing that comes to mind is single women. Compared to single men, their choice in career are limited, and their income has the tendency of being low. They had to bear the burden of the tax increase by themselves too.」

「You are right again. In other words, the 『levy imposed specifically on women』 will be most prominent in places where single women are gathered. The weaving factory we visited yesterday fulfilled these conditions, and I can think of a few other workplace where women without families are gathered– but amongst these answers, there should be a place that is very prominent in scale, correct?」

At this point, everyone aside from the Princess knew the answer. Ikuta noticed this atmosphere, but continued playing dumb and listed out the conditions.

「Since Colonel Mirtog knows about that place, it should be a venue that has deep ties with the military. At the same time, it is of the type that is hard for him to tell the Princess over the dining table—」

「It's a brothel, Your Highness.」

Yatori cut off Ikuta who was starting to get arrogant and spilled the answer. The youth stood there stiffly as if he was frozen.

「A place where single women gathers, and closely tied to the military that has many single men. It is also an inadequate topic for breakfast. This is the only place that fits all these criterias.」

The Princess got it quickly, and her head that was resting on Yatori's lap slowly turned red. At the same time, collapsed on his knees with a defeated look.

「Too much… That's too much… Yatori, you are too mean… I wanted to keep teasing her until everyone aside from the Princess knows the answer before revealing the answer…」

「Since your intentions are so obvious, it is a given that I won't let you have your way— Your Highness, please don't mind him. It doesn't matter even if you didn't realise the answer.」

Yatori's quick wittedness minimise the damage, it still had a big impact on the Princess. Seeing her turned silent, the flame-colored hair girl held the Princess' hand to console her, and looked at the culprit with a cold gaze.

「... Aside from this meaningless bullying, you have some constructive thoughts to share, correct?」

「Yes... Regarding that, since the Princess wants to visit the scene, let's follow this plan.」

Ikuta recovered from his depression, and sweep his eyes over all his comrades with a hand on his chin.

「As Matthew is the local, he will have to pass... Let's decide the members with elimination. First will be the ikemen, then Major Sazarf... The two of them and I will go investigate.」

「Ah... Ok–」 「No, wait! Don't agree so hastily, Lieutenant Torway!」

Torway wanted to accept on reflex, but his supervising officer raised a hand in objection.

「... Hey, Lieutenant Ikuta. I might be overthinking this, but from what you are saying, the investigation seems to mean going...」

「If you want to ask me, the place where women spill their secrets most easily is–」

Ikuta didn't let the Major finish his question, and started to rumble on:

「My immediate answer would be... on the bed.」

「... Huh?」

Torway who was almost as innocent as the Princess finally realized the conclusion he didn't explain. Ikuta leaned in close to Torway with a malicious smile, then grabbed his quivering shoulders firmly with both hands.

「Hey, ikemen. I heard that just now, you said 『okay』, right?」

「W-Wait! Hold on a minute, Ik-kun…!」

「What's there to hesitate, the chance for you to use that pretty face of yours is finally here. After all, speaking of brothel, you will have to investigate by infiltration. It's no big deal, you just need to whisper sweet nothings into their ears, then they will tell you everything on their mind without a second thought. Hehehe… Sigh~ I'm so envious… this is really maddening, damn it ahhh…!」

「Calm… Calm down, Lieutenant Ikuta! At least decide if you want to laugh, cry or get mad!」

Seeing Ikuta shaking Torway's shoulders hard with a scary expression, Sazarf tried to pull him away frantically. But the youth still clung on stubbornly, and the trash bin thrown by the Princess hit the back of his head.

「Just… Just how vulgar are you…! Who permitted you to do an infiltrating investigation!」

The youth brushed off the rubbish on his head, and smiled boldly.

「Hehe… Those who act according to orders are second rate, and those who don't need orders to act are first rate. It's useless to stop me, Princess. I made up my mind, and no matter what sacrifice I have to make, I'm determined to carry out this mission!」

「This… This guy is sick in the head…! He is saying something retarded with such serious eyes…!」

「His goal and his methods have been switched…!」

Matthew and Haro who were standing shoulder to shoulder were completely dumbfounded. Ikuta's completely shameless attitude threw the entire place into chaos, and the Princess remained adamant in her objection.



「No no no! I won't allow it! Definitely won't allow it! No matter what you say, I forbid you!」

「That's too tyrannical! There are no questions on the effectiveness of an infiltration mission! Princess, do you have any proper reasons to refute this? No you don't! It's impossible for there to be any!」

「That… That's… Basically, Torway isn't willing! Major Sazarf isn't too keen either, you are the only one who wants to do it!」

「… Oh? It's true that these guys look unwilling…」

Ikuta shifted his eyes away from Torway, turned around and looked at his superior officer standing behind him.

「……Major Sazarf. May I ask, do you hate brothels?」

「… Huh? Ah… No… Well…」

「Alright! Being hesitant means the answer is no! As you can see, the Major is willing to go!」

The instant she heard that, Princess Chamille looked at the two men with a gaze below freezing point. She ignored Sazarf's desperate pleas, and racked her brain to thwart Ikuta's plans.

「… A replacement plan, if I have a replacement plan, then you won't have a problem, correct!?」

「Oh? We need to gather intelligence from the brothel, so can you find a replacement that is more effective than infiltrating it, Princess? Interesting? Pray tell us.」

Ikuta asked her, but the Princess didn't have anything in mind. She kept weighing the chips she had on hand.

「… Funds, if we pay them, we can obtain information from the harlots easily…」

「It’s regrettable, but that’s out of the question. Given the current situation, giving out money freely won’t be more effective, it will draw in more fake news instead.」

Ikuta gave a haughty laughed. The Princess grit her teeth vexingly, but continued thinking. Since money can’t buy intelligence, then they just have to offer something other than money.

「… Instead of money, we just need to appeal to their emotions, is that it?」

「And to achieve our goal, the most effective way is through pillow talk on a bed.」

「There… There’s another way! Human emotions aren’t limited to those between a man and a woman!」

After saying that, the Princess glared intensely at Ikuta. Without even knowing why she was so stubborn about it herself, the young girl didn’t think through it clearly before blurting out the idea that just came to her.

Mactech is situated at the junction between the east west and north south main roads, and was famous as the 「most prosperous city in the Ebodolk province」.

Even though it wasn’t as bustling as the capital Banhataal, there were still plenty of people coming in for the purpose of trading and transporting Kuna rice; more importantly, the public order was very good for a city of this scale. This wasn’t just because of the population density, the Ebodolk province being a prosperous land

also reduce the number of people who had to resort to crime out of starvation.

That might be so, the public order definitely didn't form naturally when the people gathered. When the city was developing, all sorts of problems affecting public order sprung up. One of them were the brothels that existed all over the city when the laws regulating them had yet to take shape.

Having brothels between residential houses and shops caused a lot of commotion between the citizens, such as injuries that arose when adultery was uncovered. But the serious problem was that normal taverns and inns were also forming alliances with the brothels. Some harlots would head to taverns they were familiar with to hook up men, and would rent a room in the nearby inn if she secured a client— In such a way, the various businesses worked together in the pursuit of profits. There were even some who said that the harlots waiting in the brothels for customers were the minority instead.

Where was the boundary of prostitution and normal business operations? How could harlots be differentiated from other women? The men were confused. If they got laid without completely understanding the situation, there might be misunderstandings.

An example would be something like this. One morning, a man who hooked up with a woman in a tavern and spent the night with her. When she woke up, the woman was gone and his wallet was cleaned out. The man who realised his money was stolen while he was sleeping searched for the woman in a rage, and found that woman at the tavern they met the day before and flirting with other men.

「You damn broad, how dare you lie to me and steal my money!」 The woman retorted coldly: 「What foolery are you saying? I let you

enjoy for a night, so of course I took the money I deserved!」
––That's right, this woman was actually a prostitute.

In the end, both sides refused to back down. The man claims he 「never intended to use money to buy a woman」, so it was unreasonable to force him to pay; the woman insisted that 「she attended to the man as a prostitute」, so receiving payment was only right. Even though whether the 「woman informed the other party she was a harlot before committing the act」 turned into a point of contention, it was just an argument of his words versus her words since no one else aside from the two subjects knew the truth. If this sort of argument gets escalated, they might turn to a third party that uses violence, the mafia, to resolve the issue.

If such incidents keep happening, the men wouldn't dare to flirt with the women easily, and the harlots have to worry about customers being too scared to visit. Worst of all, the mafia would start get a pimp cut of their income. Feeling that this wasn't sustainable, some of the brothel owners discuss this issue with one of their main clients in the past, the Ebodolk province garrisoned army. And the commander at that time was of course, the head of the Tetzirich house.

After learning the troubles of the business owners, the Tetzirich head thinks that with the huge increase of brothels, there were a need to manage them. He concluded that the brothels should be moved to a certain restricted zone with the approval of the government and the protection of the army. After planning out the specifics, he proposed his idea to the governor of the province. As this would ensure a new tax avenue, the official back then gladly approved of the plan.

And so, renowned in the Empire for its scale– the red-light district of Mactech city was born.

「Okay okay! Stop dazing off! The exhibition time will start in another hour! Natiki, Srinka, put on your make up too!」

This was the room where the harlots waiting to be called used for preparations. A short man shouted in a shrill voice as he walked past. The harlots answered him without much enthuse as they focused on themselves through the mirror.

「Okay okay~… Ah, Srinka, can you pass me that essential oil?」

「Rose oil? Or sage plant oil?」

「I want the sage plant oil… Say, don't you think the manager seemed very hysterical?」

「Because two more people flown off last week～ He probably got scolded by the higher-ups. How self-centered, the ones who are doing the work is us～」

She watched the manager left the preparation room cheerfully with scornful eyes, the harlot with the longer face named Srinka snorted. The Natiki who was a bit older expressed her agreement, and covered the wrinkles in the corner of her eyes with powder.

「But it's true that we can't make a living if we don't work hard, the tax will squeeze us dry.」

「That's right~ I can make do with just three generous regulars in the past, but we need five now.」

「That's why we can't survive if we don't make more deals. I even want to leave the man to sleep after doing the deed, and take on another customer.」

「Ahaha! Well said!」

When the two ladies who had finished their makeup and were picking accessories, the sound of the door chime came from the corridor. There was still some time before they were opened for business, but some impatient customer were already here.

「Ah～ I'm sorry, dear customers. We are still in the midst of preparation, please come back in about an hour—」

The manager tended to the visitor with a smiling face, but frowned at the sight he saw after opening the door. There were two neatly dressed youth standing side by side, and one of them was very handsome too— That was all good, but the problem is the tag-along who didn't belong here.

「… Ah～dear customers, this place is… basically a venue for adults to socialize, so bringing a child with you is…」

The manager didn't hold back and observed the young girl who was pulling back her shoulders and wearing a plain milk white short sleeve dress. She looked about 12 to 13, and her voluminous blonde hair was tied up behind her in a ponytail. She didn't wore any accessories, and from her dressing, her family didn't seem very well off. However, she had very beautiful facial features.

「… Ah, you want to sell this girl? If yes, please come by the back door—」

「No, that's not it.」

The dark haired youth said. Compared to the stiff-faced pretty boy and the little girl, this youth acted very naturally.

「We have our reasons, actually… We are looking for the mother of this girl.」

「Huh?」

「I’m just accompanying her, but please hear me out. This girl is born in Mactech, and has been working in this chap’s house as a maid for the past two years. As a reward for her hard work, she was granted a long leave for the first time. That’s why this girl asked this chap who has business in Mactech to bring her along, so she can see her mother again after such a long time. However…」

The youth sighed and shrug in front of the troubled manager.

「How pitiful! Even though she visited her old home, the girl’s mother is nowhere to be found. We heard that she got evicted because she can’t pay the rent. After that, we heard rumours had fallen to working in the red-light district during our search for her.」

The manager finally understood the situation, and the raven haired youth leaned in close:

「Please, just a short while will be enough, can you let this girl see the harlots working here? Even if her mother isn’t here, there might be someone who knows, so let us talk to them for a bit…」

「No, I’m sorry to say this, but we are busy preparing for the shop’s opening…」

「Of… Of course, I’m not asking you to help us free of charge!」

After the manager spoke as if he was going to turn them down, the youth anxiously took out his purse. He then picked out three silver coins, and after thinking about it for a moment, he kept one of it and shoved two of the coins into the manager’s hand.

「Please consider it in exchange for this…! We won’t disrupt your preparation work, and will leave before the shop opens!」

「P… Please!」 「Please help us!」

The pretty boy and little girl also pleaded sincerely alongside the black haired youth. Lowering their heads and pleading others for help just for the sake of a mere maid, so there were great masters like that in the world too— the manager thought as he put the coins into his pocket.

「… You must leave after thirty minutes.」

Princess Chamille followed the manager into the brothel, and by using Torway who was between her and the manager, she whispered to the other youth.

「… I thought you can only collect false information if you throw around money?」

「This isn't payment for the information, but compensation for causing them trouble. And I also acted as if my funds are limited, so that manager and the others won't think that they can get any money from us. If anyone who heard that story tries to be pushy and sell us 『information about the mother』 we can just ignore them. 」

「That might be so… but that manager didn't look like he was moved at all.」

「Of course, this don't matter much to him after all… And Princess, your acting is really lousy, you should say 『please, I beg you good sir, help us』 instead of 『Please help us』, right? Pull yourself together, this is your plan after all, Your Highness.」

「S-Sorry… I was careless… I will be more careful.」

The Princess showed her serious face after saying that, but neither she nor Torway were good at acting. However, Ikuta's covered for their stiff acting with his brazen attitude.

「This is the preparation room before the harlots head to the exhibition area– Hey, it's me, I'm going in!」

The manager announced before opening the door, and there were more than ten gaudily dressed women putting on makeup and picking out accessories. They were all dressed, but some of them had exposed their skin to put on perfume, which made Torway hesitate from stepping in.

「This little girl wants to find her mother who seemed to be working in the red-light district. If you are the mother, then raise your hand and admit it; if not, tell them what you do know.」

After the manager said the main points, he left immediately. The gazes of the harlots all fell on the three who were left behind. Very soon, the women who were interested left their seats and approached them.

「Hmm? What? What's going on here? You are looking for the mother of this child?」

「She looked about twelve or thirteen? That's pretty old… So Srinka, she's your kid, right?」

「I have never abandoned any child I bore… And Yumi, come over here and let me punch you!」

「Erm, don't you think the taller boy looks really handsome? That's a rarely seen high standards, he is making my heart race!」

When the first one got the ball rolling, the other harlots also joined in quickly. Before long, Princess Chamille and Torway were overwhelmed by this atmosphere, and only Ikuta remained at ease and started getting down to business.

「Good day, ladies. My apologies for intruding on your precious preparation time, but we have our own troubles too–」

After opening his speech with that, Ikuta explained the situation with much more emotions than the manager, and no matter how one diced it, it was already a 「story」. When Ikuta spent almost 5 minutes to explain the entire matter, some of the harlots were tearing up to this fictional script.

「Boohoo… Is that so… Chammy-chan has a hard life…」

「Here here, this candy is for you.」

Her father went missing shortly after her birth, and in order to help her alcoholic mother, she started working in a kitchen of a restaurant when she was eight. But she couldn't keep up with the expenses, and went to work in a rich family far away as a maid some time later. She was bullied by mean seniors there too, and after enduring harsh conditions, she continued sending more than half her pay to her mother— Ikuta told the harlots the girl's tale. Anyway, through this sad story filled with hardship, Ikuta succeeded in earning the unconditional sympathy of the harlots towards the Princess… No the impoverished but strong willed girl Chammy.

「Thank… Thank you…」

Princess Chamille took the candy from a harlot and a sense of guilt welled up within her. She felt it was despicable to gain the sympathy of others by using a fictional tale.

「… I… heard that times are tough lately for everyone working in the red-light district… If my mother is really working here, I don't know if she can make a living…」

The Princess suppressed her feelings of self-loath, then proceeded as planned to find out the effect of the taxes on the workers in the red-light district. The harlots all frowned and groaned.

「Hmm～… Since Chammy-chan is at this age, that means your mother is above 30? I don't want to say this, but it will be tough for her to survive in the current red-light district…」

「Because you can get more customers when you are young. There are those who work past their twenties, but starting out in her thirties is a little bit… Leaving other things aside, just the incredibly high taxes will eat up a lot of her income.」

「By the way, one of our colleagues who flown last month was almost 40… I heard she went to the neighbouring province.」

One of the harlots suddenly muttered, which caught the Princess' attention.

「What do you mean by 『flown』?」

「… It's a term used in this industry, meaning running away in the middle of the night because of debt. It might sound uncomfortable, but this isn't that rare, and happens more often after the tax increase. Every month… No, when it is really bad, I think someone will disappear every week…」

「Where do the woman who has flown go?」

「It differs from person to person, but leaving the province is the more basic choice, as the debtors won't be able to find them.」

「But migrating to another province requires permission from the authorities, if they migrated without permission, they would find it hard to find a job or do anything in that new place. However, it's

hard to imagine permits being issued to people who are embroiled in financial troubles…」

As she was focusing on her thoughts, Princess Chamille started talking in her usual tone, and the harlots all looked at her with dumbfounded faces. After a long while, the Princess realised she was letting up her disguise, but the harlots seemed very impressed instead.

「I don't understand what you are saying at all… Chammy-chan knows some very difficult terms~」

「Yes… She was thought to read and write after coming to my place, this girl is very outstanding…」

Torway who was surrounded by the harlots like a mosquito trap started sweating profusely, but he still tried to cover for the Princess. If they spent too much time here, they might blow their cover– with that in mind, Ikuta decided to look for a chance to leave.

「Ara～ Thank you everyone for your information. It will be troubling if we intrude on you for too long, so it's about time for us to leave. If there are any leads on her mother, please send someone to this inn.」

Ikuta handed a slip of paper with their address to a harlot, then signaled to the other two with a look.

「Huh, you are leaving already? I'm sorry we weren't much help, Chammy-chan.」

「No, it's alright… You have been a big help, thank you everyone for sharing your valuable information with me.」

The Princess bowed her head low in thanks, and said the only truthful thing during this hypocritical episode. Even though the trio

had already walked far down the corridor, the harlots continued waving at them.

They then spent three whole days investigating the red-light district of Mactech before returning to the Tetzirich manor.

It was inevitable that Princess Chamille would get tired as she wasn't used to putting on an act. However, Torway was even more exhausted than her. He suffered a lot during these three days as he lacked immunity towards women.

「Anyway, we finally have a rough gauge on the situation of the harlots.」

Ikuta who was seated on the bed reported. They all gathered in a room to hold their conference.

「I see… As for us, we went to ask the garrisoned soldiers. As expected, a lot of them are anguished over the current situation, as their favoured harlots had all fled by night.」

「Their grumbles probably reached my Dad that way. For the soldiers who are single, their monthly visits to the brothels are like the oasis for their mind, so this isn't a laughing matter to them.」

Sazarf and Matthew started pondering, and the two ladies who stayed behind with them expressed their opinions.

「I have also asked the views of the unwed female soldiers. It might sound strange, but their reaction aren't as big as the men. Because they are guaranteed bed, lodging and meals if they stayed with the unit.」

「But no one liked the tax increase. After all, the money they can send home has decreased…」

Haro probably thought about her family back at home, and looked a little melancholic. After listening to their report, Ikuta said to Princess Chamille:

「The situation seems really clear. What do you want to do, Princess?」

「Hmm… The most prominent effect of the tax increase is still the harlots going missing.」

The Princess groaned, then placed her hand on her chin and pondered. She felt a sense of dissonance that she couldn't shake off.

「No matter what, I have personally observed the situation in the red-light district. I will need to visit the source to investigate any further.」

Aside from Ikuta, the other five all had serious expressions. The Princess thought– even though the obstacles were still there, they had cleared a small path, so it was time to strike at the heart of the matter.

「Make the preparations, I want to visit the governor of the Ebodolk province, Thezeni Hamatoll.」

Princess Chamille intentionally didn't give any advance notice, and aside from Sazarf who would hold the fort, the other five members of the Knight Corps visited the government office staffed by many employees in a manner similar to a sneak attack.

「Please… Please wait…!」

The staff at the counter pushed the responsibilities of tending to their visit to each other, and this confused reaction was only natural. However, right until the moment the unexpected guest arrived, the table which was surrounded by the group had other issues.

「… I'm shocked, to actually gamble on snakes and ladders so brazenly during working hours.」

The Princess looked at the square board with boxes drawn on it and the dices around the table and sighed… The surprised visit was meant to catch the governor off guard, they had no intentions of inspecting the work of the staff.

「Forget it, this is probably the norm. This is probably one of the better places since I don't see any alcohol.」

Ikuta answered with a yawn, and Princess Chamille could only grit her teeth as the reality proved that she couldn't refute his words. Before even meeting the governor, her mood was started to worsen.

「– The Third Princess! Ara, my apologies for the poor reception…! 」

After being brought to the meeting room for about five minutes, the governor of the Ebodolk province, Viscount Thezeni Hamatoll appeared before the group. The high ranking administrative official who was over 50 years old and had a fat figure apologized for welcoming the Princess so late, and kept wiping his forehead with a handkerchief.

「I should be apologizing for the sudden visit, you must be very busy.」

「No no! If I know that the Princess is honouring us with a visit, I will push all matters aside and rush over! Please don't doubt the loyalty of your humble servant!」

It seemed that he made full use of the five minutes before he came in to prepare his face and his pleasantries. Princess Chamille and Hamatoll who was all smiles sat opposite each other at the table.

Ikuta and the others who were here as her escorts continued standing behind the Princess as they went into the main topic.

「I'm here today to clarify some matters.」

「Yes! Do ask away.」

「Well, I heard that the Ebodolk province has imposed a heavy poll tax targeted towards women.」

She made the first move. The Princess observed Hamatoll for any reaction, but his smile remained unmoved.

「Yes, this province is adjusting our tax collection in such a way. May I ask if there are any issues with that?」

「I want to know how did things evolved into such a stage? After all, I'm not very familiar with the situation in the Ebodolk province.」

「Yes, then may I assume you are here to conduct an inspection?」

「There is no need to be so formal. It's just my personal interest.」

It was obviously a superficial excuse, even the Princess herself thought it sound that way. The governor began with an 「Umm」.

「How did things evolved into such a stage…? Well, where should I start…」

「The reason for the increase in taxes and the means of collecting them. Please explain in detail in such that order.」

「Thank you for your kind instructions. Then let me start with the reason— the harvest of the main agricultural product of the Ebodolk province, the 『Kuna rice』, has been poor for the past 3 years.」

「Since the harvest is poor, isn't the norm to reduce the tax collection?」

「No, the situation for Kuna rice is a bit different. The taxation system for the Ebodolk province is generally collected in the form of money, and only some of the crops could be submitted directly as tax. And Kuna rice is the exception to these crops, because the amount it is taxed– which is its tax rate is set rather high.」

「I see, it means we don't collect tax from farmers in the form of money, but rice. But the poor harvest of the Kuna rice meant that they had to pay tax in cash instead, leading to a fall in tax collected?」

「Yes, for the Kuna rice, we have already secured the means to sell them for a high price after collection, so for me, collecting tax in the form of goods is better than collecting money. The tax rates were set with this in time; however, the poor Kuna rice harvest resulted in monetary collection becoming the norm. So there is a need to readjust the collection rates.」

Which meant that they were dependent on collecting crops as taxes, and earn money by reselling the Kuna rice at a high price. This reason sounded convincing.

「Then next is the method of increasing taxes… As your highness already knows, I used the method of increasing taxes on women. However, since taxes are collected with a family as a unit, then you should understand that this is no different than a simple increase in taxes. This is done out of a sense of 『fairness』, since the taxes imposed on men is higher.」

「What about the extra burden imposed by this policy onto women living by themselves?」

「Imposing taxes on singles without any family has always troubled me… There are many people without fix jobs or even homes, so there are many cases of tax evasions. Although we had never expected such people to be a healthy source of tax income, but you can say that this is the result of the negative influence from the past.」

「But I have also heard that this policy resulted in single women migrating to another province.」

At this instant, Hamatoll's face twitched, and the Princess didn't miss that.

「Thank you for your kind advice. There might be a need for us investigate and take action.」

His wavering expression was gone in a flash, and the governor quickly concealed his emotions behind his politeness. But right after he finished talking, the Princess tried probing again.

「I also want to ask about the detail behind the poor harvest of the Kuna rice.」

「Like I mentioned earlier, the harvest for the past three years had fallen drastically…」

「As all the provinces submit a summary of the main crops that had been harvested, I also know about that. But what's the reason behind the poor harvest?」

「This probably isn't the only reason… But it seemed to be the adverse effect of insufficient rainfall.」

「From the numbers, that appears to be so. But, regarding that…」

The Princess said as she pulled out several pieces of folded paper, which she then opened and laid out on the table. The papers were full of numbers.

「This is the rainfall records of the various provinces in the south of the Empire for the past two decades. It's just as you say, the numbers for the Ebodolk province has fallen drastically for the past three years. However, there are a few weird things.」

「You are referring to…?」

「Look at the numbers for the neighbouring Kuntsui province. The east of the Kuntsui province shares a border with the Ebodolk province, but its rainfall didn't change significantly for the past twenty years. It's the same for the other neighbouring provinces. The only place that is seeing less rain is Ebodolk province.」

「That's the problem with weather, I think such a situation is very possible.」

「Indeed, the weather seems unpredictable at times. However, with enough records, we can tell that the mood of the weather has a fixed tendency. What I mean is— aside from the past three years, the amount of rainfall in the Ebodolk province has never been less than that of the Kuntsui province.」

「Erm…」

「And this isn't just for the past twenty years, but the conclusion I got by studying similar weather records for the past 82 years. Take a look at this paper, there are too many numbers, so I omitted the other provinces aside from the Ebodolk and Kuntsui provinces…」

「Please… Please wait, Your Highness, hold on for a while.」

Hamatoll interrupted the Princess with a troubled face.

「Pardon me, but where did these numbers come from? Even this government office don't have records that goes back 82 years…」

「…? I'm just referencing the documentation kept in the Empire's central library.」

「Then, did you copied these numbers down from the library before leaving central?」

「No, I wrote them after coming here.」

Their conversation seemed a little misaligned, which confused the governor even more. However, what Princess Chamille said next crush all these emotions.

「I browse through the records in central in the past, then just recall the necessary parts and wrote them down. Did I mention anything that is hard to understand?」

Even the members of the Knight Corps behind the Princess felt a chill– the amount of rainfall of the southern provinces dating back twenty years, and the rainfall of the Ebodolk and Kuntsui province for the past 82 years. The Princess claimed that she had at least memorized all the numbers that matched these two conditions.

「Ha… Haha…」

Hamatoll showed an awkward smile, but Ikuta who was behind the Princess noticed that the air about the Viscount had obviously changed. At this moment, the governor stopped what the girl before him was doing.

「– Such a situation isn't impossible either. If we continue our observations, there would be a day when a day with such unprecedented weather happens again. And the Ebodolk province

just happened to experience such a period for the past three years.
」

The Viscount with a perfect poker face used coincidence as his shield, and fended off all allegations. Everything was blamed on the everchanging weather— if he continued to say that, the Princess wouldn't have any way to defeat this excuse. No matter how many numbers there were, a past record was just a past record.

Knowing that this was the time to stop, Princess Chamille switched the topic, and only engaged in idle chatter. Even though the Viscount maintained his humble demeanor, the wariness in his eyes never waned.

Part 2

「That most suspicious part is the reason for the tax increase, 『the Kuna rice's poor harvest』.」

The group gathered in a room as usual, and the Princess started off with that. Compared to the beginning of the investigation, her suspicion had grown greatly.

「The rainfall report in Ebodolk province for the past three years is strange. It might just be a weather abnormality, there are enough elements to suspect that the numbers had been edited. This report of low rainfall might be forged to make the story of 『Kuna rice poor harvest』 more convincing.」

「Going deeper, the Kuna rice's poor harvest even turned into a reason to hike the tax rate… In other words, the Princess concludes that the low rainfall and Kuna rice's poor harvest is a lie— a foundation he laid in order to increase the taxes in a natural way?」

When he heard Ikuta's question, Princess Chamille nodded firmly. On the other hand, Matthew tilted his head and groaned.

「Faking low rainfall and a poor harvest of Kuna rice… Is that even possible? Even if he changed the numbers on documents, the local residents could still sense the truth behind the situation, right?」

「It is natural to have doubts, but that isn't so, Matthew. Even though a person could more or less tell how much the annual rainfall is, they couldn't grasp the rainfall for the entire Ebodolk province. Because, normally speaking, the senses of a human are constrained to a narrow area.」

「That might not be true, especially for farmers who had to tend to a field that's tens to hundreds of times their own homes. And the condition of the crops and harvest would reflect on the rain amount too. Those who owns vast swathe of farmland can sense how much the annual rainfall is.」

Since the subject was his hometown, Matthew's rebuttal sounded very convincing. The dark haired youth felt glee welled up in his heart as he nodded.

「That's correct, Matthew. Someone who owns a lot of land can say with a lot of confidence how the rainfall for a big area is— However, there aren't that many of them, right?」

「Of course, there aren't many of them. There's probably just a handful in the entire province.」

「This means that it wouldn't be too difficult for Viscount Hamatoll to coordinate their testimonies ahead of time.」

Matthew was stunned for a moment, then clicked his tongue and said: 「I see.」 After getting their agreement, Ikuta continued:

「More specifically, most of the big landowners in the Ebodolk province are farmers growing crops– in other words, the main producer of the Kuna rice. He just need to match sure their testimonies regarding rainfall matches, and then buy the rice at a slightly higher price, and he can pull off the poor harvest farce. As for the rice he bought… If it was me, I will hide it in a place where it wouldn't be found at first.」

「After all, the market price for rice will obviously increase during a poor harvest… After the price of the merchandize had been jacked up, he just need to carefully pick buyers to earn more profits.」

Yatori nodded repeatedly as if she understood everything. At this moment, Haro suddenly raised her hand hesitantly.

「Erm… I understand from your explanation about the Kuna rice's poor harvest, but why did the governor imposed a 『levy targeted against women』…?」

When she heard that, the Princess crossed her arms and started pondering.

「Hmm, that is true… Collecting taxes in such a manner would force all the single ladies who can't pay the levy to flee from this province, and decrease the tax collected on a whole. The governor can't be a retard that will miss this logic. In other words, Viscount Hamatoll has a reason why he wants to keep the status quo even at the expenses of collecting less taxes.」

The Princess postulates that this was the main reason behind this incident. However, she couldn't deduce the actual content. The only thing she could do was to work from the part she did understand and gradually clear the obstacles.

「– Alright, let's split into two teams. Major Sazarf, Matthew and Torway, I need you to obtain evidence that the poor harvest of the Kuna rice is a forgery. It will be great if you can confiscate the actual product. Matthew will be a huge asset with his local knowledge.」

After laying out the instructions to the three of them, Princess Chamille turned to the other trio.

「Yatori, Haro and Solork. You will follow me to Mactech, I want to know how the harlots make their escape in the middle of the night. Depending on the results, we might get a glimpse on the true intention of the imposing the 『levy targeted against women』.」

Her voice was no longer hesitant as she gave her orders. From the way the Princess acted, it was clear that she didn't just have a brilliant mind and completing tasks— her leadership as a ruler could also be seen.

「That concludes my orders– If there are no objections, let's get moving!」

The seven of them got up from their chairs or beds and got going.

After Sazarf, Matthew and Torway received their orders to 「obtain evidence that the poor harvest of the Kuna rice is a forgery」, they decided to head to the nearest warehouse in the province.

「If the harvest really is poor, then there shouldn't be much rice in the warehouse… But if that was fabricated, the large quantities of rice he bought under the table might be stored in these warehouse.」

「But if everyone knows about the warehouse, then keeping it here isn't really hiding it, right?」

Matthew retorted calmly as he walked along the path in the night. Sazarf sighed:

「You need to heat up the atmosphere, Second Lieutenant Matthew… The girls has all been taken by the other team, I won't be able to hang on if I hear too many depressing things.」

「To be honest, I'm relieved that I don't need to visit the red-light district again…」

「Fuhaha, I will bring you there personally next time, First Lieutenant Torway.」

「Huh! You… You don't have to take me there…!!」

「Don’t hold back, it’s actually a great place… Hmm? This looks like the place.」

Far shining light was projected from the entrance of their destination, and was blinding to people who had gotten used to the dark. Sazarf took out his partner Kii from the pouch on his waist, and sent light signals indicating that they were friendlies. The soldiers who noticed the visitors rushed over immediately.

「It’s the middle of the night, where are you people from!?」

「Excuse me, we need to trouble you with something… Ehh? Aren’t you Sergeant Nigant?」

Matthew was planning to ease his way into the topic, but saw a familiar face and called his name. The middle aged man named Sergeant Nigant was stunned for a moment, and then held Matthew’s hands with all smiles.

「Ara, I was just thinking that you look familiar, aren’t you the young master of the Tetzirich house!? You should have told me since you are back! I heard the news that you performed splendidly in central and the north!」

「… Huh? The young master of the Tetzirich house? That’s not possible, he should be chubbier, right?」

「Retard, how many years ago did you think that was? And you can’t address him casaully as Young Master anymore! This is the 『Imperial Knight』 and hero of the northern rebellion, Sir Second Lieutenant Matthew Tetzirich!」

It seems that Sergeant Nigant wasn’t the only person Matthew knew, and he was quickly surrounded by a group of soldiers he knew from old times, and they started touching him in a joking manner. But

being treated like a kid probably felt embarrassing, so Matthew quickly cut off their welcome and got down to business.

「S-Sorry for telling you so late, but I'm here today to ask a small favor.」

「Haha, what is it? Need to borrow the toilet? Young master, you peed in a field in the past, and got lectured for it, correct!?」

「Don't dig up unnecessary things from the past! That's not it—」

They were as close as family, which made it hard for things to progress instead. Seeing how flustered Matthew was, Sazarf tapped his shoulder gently and took a step forward.

「Pardon me for disturbing at this late hour, I'm a Army Major Senpa Sazarf…」

When they heard this name and the rank of a Major, the rowdy soldiers stood up straight immediately.

「You… You are the overall commander of the rear guard mission during the Northern Rebellion!? I apologize for our poor reception…!」

「No, we should be the one apologizing for the late night visit… But we do have permission from Colonel Tetzirich. These are the orders, do take a look.」

In order to let them see it clearly, Sazarf let Kii illuminate the document he presented. Sergeant Nigant who read the content of the document looked troubled.

「Major Senpa Sazarf, Second Lieutenant Matthew Tetzirich and First Lieutenant Torway Remeon, just for tonight, will be omitted from the prohibited list of the warehouse protection garrison…?」

「Which means you don't need to worry too much and let us in. Sorry about that, but we can settle our matter in about an hour.」

「Please… Please wait, all of you are going to the warehouse?」

「You don't need to know that, but I will be frank, we will be doing so.」

「But that won't do. The duties of us soldiers are to protect the warehouse. Unless there is an emergency, only the authorized officials may enter the warehouse. You will be trespassing if you did that.」

「Since there is an official orders, you won't be prosecuted for this, I can guarantee that. So don't say anymore and let us through. I'm really sorry about this.」

「… The officials will be here tomorrow morning, can't you wait until then?」

Sazarf shook his head silently. Sergeant Nigant and the others could tell the trio were forced by their circumstances, and after hesitating for a while, they opened a path with a sigh.

「… Since you have already gotten permission from our Commanding Officer, then please proceed. For the next hour, we will pretend we didn't see anything, and become strawmans as you wished.」

To avoid the stored items from being stolen, the warehouse was built in a small base. After getting the reluctant approval of the unit commander, the others turned a blind eye to Matthew and his group, allowing them to approach the target building without any problems. However…

「It's barred and locked, Major.」

「Hmm… That's a problem… But it would deviate from the contents of the orders if we ask them to open the locks.」

Sazarf scratched his head hard in the face of the locked sturdy door of the warehouse. But when he shifted his gaze up, he found an opening they could exploit.

「Hey! There's a window up there, can we go in from there?」

「That's rather high, more than 3 metres off the ground. And from its size, I don't know if someone can fit in through there…」

Matthew who was thinking about his own body size had a troubled expression. And so, the two of them naturally focused their gaze on Torway who was both tall and slender.

「Give it a try, Torway. I will let you step on me.」

Matthew sighed as he went to the wall and bend over. Torway was a little hesitant, but made up his mind after Sazarf lent him his Luminous Sprite as a light source for the warehouse and Matthew urged him to hurry up.

「… Alright, I'm doing it, Ma-chan. Mmh… Ughh…!」

The youth stepped onto the back of his friend, and jumped for the window that was still far from his reach. After getting his hand on the window ledge, he pushed his upper body through the window to observe the inside. And of course, it was completely dark, so Torway took the Luminous Sprite from his pouch with one hand, and shone it at a wide angle.

「It's high up… we should use a rope to be safe.」

Torway put Kii back into his pouch, then took out the rope tied to his waist. He dangled one end down, and threw the other end to Sazarf.

His supervising officer who realized his intent held on to the rope tightly, and Torway slid the rest of his body through the window too.

「Phew…!」

He flipped forward while grabbing the rope, and stepped onto the wall with his feet. And now, he just needed to lower himself along the wall. Considering the cliffs he had to climb in order to secure the position to snipe the Phantom Unit, this was a cakewalk for Torway.

After landing in the warehouse that was so dark he couldn't even see his own hands, Torway took out the Luminous Sprite Kii from his pouch and placed it on the ground, letting it lit up the surroundings. He could see large sacks filled with grains stacked inside the warehouses. They were probably stacked away from the window to make infiltration through the window more difficult.

「With Ma-chan's body shape, it would be dangerous for him to come down in the same way… I better prepare a place for him to step on.」

Acting so considerately was just like Torway. He started stacking the sacks of grain near the window for the sake of his friend.

「– Uwah!」

About ten minutes later, Matthew who used his friend's consideration as a cushion in place of a stepladder successfully infiltrated the warehouse.

「That hurts… Damn it, we got the task allocation mixed up, this sort of things are Ikuta's expertise.」

Matthew nursed his waist and stood up. Torway helped him up with a smile.

「No, you are up next, Ma-chan. I can't tell the grains apart anyway. 」

When he heard what Torway said, Matthew looked at the interior of the warehouse that was lit by Kii's wide angle lights. At first glance, sacks were placed everywhere, but on closer observation, that wasn't so. The empty spaces were very prominent too.

「This is wheat, that's chickpea, and those are lentil…」

Matthew wasn't satisfied with checking the markings on the sacks, and carefully felt the contents through the sacks with his hands. If the poor harvest of the Kuna rice was a scam, then it might be stored here and while disguised as another grain. He could tell if it was rice with just a touch.



… There's no time to check all the sacks, but there aren't any of them that are unmarked or with the with contents that didn't match their description.」

「What about the Kuna rice sacks? Are there many of them, or few?」

「I think the storage amount can be considered few. After all, the rice sacks aren't too prominent compared to the other grains.」

This would obviously happen if there was a poor harvest. So the Princess was just too suspicious after all– As Matthew was starting to have doubts, he heard creaking sound below his feet. He seemed to have stepped onto something.

「… What is this? Rice that had fallen out?」

That objects illuminated by the wide angle light were small brown grains– coarse Kuna rice with its hull removed. Common sense would dictate that these grains had fallen out of a sack, but the strange thing was, there weren't any sacks near them. These isolated grains were found in a space that was otherwise empty.

Feeling that something was amiss, Matthew picked up a grain of rice and hold it up to let the light shine through it. He then threw it into his mouth and chew on it. Torway observed that Matthew's brows were getting more and more furrowed.

「… Strange, this is new rice.」

「Huh?」

「This is recently harvested rice. Because the taste and texture of new and old rice are different. I can tell the difference even if they are raw, and the difference will be even obvious when they are cooked.」

Matthew explained as he searched around him. The presence of these grains implied that this empty space had more meaning behind it.

「... Are there new rice placed here not long ago? And a large quantity of them. And they were moved for some reason, leaving just a minuscule amount of grains behind...」

Matthew muttered. As their deduction went deeper, their expressions became more stern.

On the other side, after the Princess's group arrived at Mactech again and found an inn, she issued orders her entourage.

「First is Solork, I want you to collect information about the harlots.」

Like the previous time, everyone had taken off their uniforms and put on casual clothes. Ikuta who was never fond of the imperial military uniform acted like this was a great chance, and even intentionally put on his shirt sloppily. He showed no signs of being a soldier at all.

「What kind of information?」

「How do harlots who owes too much money flee out of the province. I need the specific details regarding that, and we are here to find out about that.」

「I see... which means to say the infiltration restriction has been lifted... Am I right?」

Seeing the youth ask with obvious excitement, the Princess reached out her right hand with a smile.

「Hand over your wallet.」

「… Ehh?」

「I'm asking you to hand over the wallet in your pants pocket, hurry up!」

Forced by the girl's intimidating aura, Ikuta reluctantly handed over his wallet. Princess Chamille checked the contents as she gave the next orders.

「Yatori, Haro! Search Ikuta! He might be hiding money somewhere else on him!」

The flame-haired girl carried out the instruction without missing a beat. Haro was a step behind, but she also started searching him after saying: 「Sorry, Mr Ikuta.」 After inspecting every nook and cranny, even the spare change in Ikuta's pocket was confiscated.

「Okay, this is today's search fee, use it carefully.」

With a few clinks, the youth receive ten odd coins. Ikuta frowned and looked at this spare change carefully.

「… Princess, this is barely enough for three beers, and nowhere near the price of hiring a prostitute.」

「That's great. If you look around the red-light district, you can find harlots heading to the inn after finishing their work. So gather your intel from there. This isn't like the previous time, you don't need to find many people and listen to them. It's an easy mission if you use your gift of the gab, right?」

「The harlot's attitude towards men is terrible outside of working hours! You want me to get intel out of them without even buying them a drink?」

「It's fine, you can definitely do it, I believe you. Go on then!」

The Princess refused to let Ikuta continue his protest, and chased him out mercilessly. The youth grumbled as he was leaving. Princess Chamille remembered something and called out to him.

「Oh right, Solork. I forgot to tell you that you need to report back every 5 hours. I will give you more funds when you come back, but if you don't come back in time, I will send Yatori out to patrol.」

「You don't trust me at all!」

After seeing the back of the cursing and swearing Ikuta disappear in the distance, the Princess sighed heavily.

「That guy is really… If I don't do this, he will definitely splurge the excess funds for his own amusement.」

「I think this is an appropriate decision, Your Highness.」

Yatori replied immediately, while Haro giggled. Princess Chamille cleared her throat, then turned to face the two of them.

「… Okay, we don't have time to dally either. While Solork is out on his mission, we have things we need to do.」

「What? So noisy, scram!」

「It's resting time, no man allowed~」

「Uwahhhh! Why why why does this always happen to me!?」

With bad tempered or drunk and sobbing harlots as his opponents, Ikuta persisted in such a tough battle that last over four hours, for three whole times. If there was an audience observing his fight, they would definitely praise him for his tenacity. But the sad thing was, he ended up alone after all that.

「I'm back… Ikuta's back…」

Ikuta returned to the inn where the Princess' group were staying in, and knocked the door. As every failed attempt result in bruises and scratches, his face was in a terrible state.

「Oh, Solork. Sorry, we are busy right now, so wait for a bit.」

He was refused entry. With no other choice, the youth decided to wait and lean his back on the door.

「Phew… Uwah!」

Tens of seconds later, the door behind him was opened suddenly. Ikuta who had leaned all his weight on the door fell backwards into the room.

「What are you doing, get up.」

Urged by Yatori's nonchalant voice, Ikuta got up wobbily and looked inside the room. The youth's eyes were wide open because of the unexpected scene that awaited him.

「Ah, welcome back, Mr Ikuta.」

Before him were two beautiful and lovely ladies covered in translucent sari.[2] Their boldly exposed cleavage drew attention to their bosoms, and the lipstick covered lips felt moist and lustrous. Their voluminous hair flowed onto their bare shoulders, and silver accessories were adorned onto their ears and neck generously, lending them an air of mesmerizing sexiness.

「E-Erm… Please don't stare, it's embarrassing…」

When he saw that bashful smile, Ikuta finally understood that the two of them were Haro and Yatori disguising as harlots. Questions like why they did so were tossed aside by Ikuta, and his first reaction was to walk towards Haro, and said while holding her hands eagerly:

「… I'm buying!」

「She's not for sale!」　「We are not selling!」

The top of his head and hips were hit by Yatori's punch and the Princess' slap aggressively. The pain calmed Ikuta a little, and checked out Haro's entire body again after taking a step back.

「Hmm… This is wonderful… I want to take her home right now…」

「You are actually reacting as I expected! Do I need to hit you again to wake you up?」

Seeing the Princess lifting a chair above her head with veins appearing on her forehead, even Ikuta shook his head out of fear of his life. He wasn't a masochist, and had enough of being beat off by women.

「I get it, I really do…! Then, what's going on here? You seemed to have spent a lot of effort to dress them up.」

「Before I explain, Solork, let me ask you about your effort. Have you gotten any reliable intel on how to escape from the province?」

「If I come back empty handedly after all this time, even I will want to cry… As for the means, some of the loan sharks actually take on such requests. It's not to the extent of making a name list, but I have gotten a few names too.」

Princess Chamille nodded with satisfaction in response to this report, and shifted her gaze to Yatori and Haro.

「Alright then, we will try to do an undercover investigation too, it's time for you two to do so while disguised as harlots.」

「I… I'm so nervous!」

Haro clenched her fists tightly. Ikuta finally understand what the Princess was planning.

「I see, you want the two of them to disguise themselves as harlots, and experience the trials of fleeing by night personally?」

「According to you, this is an infiltration investigation, Solork. We can then come into direct contact with the actual people involved in assisting with the escape.」

「Yatori will negate the high risk of this plan huh… I think it's a good plan, but there's a problem– I will be frank, can you two really disguise yourselves as harlots?」

When she heard this forthright question, Yatori lowered her head a little troublingly.

「It's easy to say that I'm alright… But to be honest, I'm not confident at all.」

「It's fine, I will cover for you! Despite how I look, I'm actually great at acting!」

Haro took on the responsibility energetically. The introverted Haro displaying such enthusiasm was a surprise to Ikuta. Princess Chamille looked uneasy when she saw how energetic Haro was.

「Is this really fine…? The original plan is for Yatori and me to infiltrate…」

「I strongly object! How can the Princess do something so dangerous!?

「I concur. Your Highness, it is the duty of the knights to risk their lives to complete missions. Please leave this to us.」

Yatori showed no hesitation either. Not shying away from areas outside of her expertise was one of her many good points.

「I understand, I will leave it to you two then. Princess, you have prepared the supporting personnel too, correct?」

「Yes, I asked Colonel Mirtog to have one platoon on standby in the inns around the vicinity. Since we don't even know how many enemies there are, the best course of action is to prepare for it.」

「I can rest easy then—– Alright then, I have one last suggestion.」

Ikuta stared at the glamorously dressed duo, and said with a wry smile:

「... The makeup and dressing has to be redone. Both of them are already good looking, being dressed like this won't make them look like harlots who can't even make a living. They have to look more tired and desperate.」

「Ah–– That… That's true. I overlooked that and got too into dressing them up…」

When she noticed the serious problem, the Princess reconsidered their dressing. Ikuta was about to leave after glancing at her, but he spoke again when his hand barely touched the door handle.

「Oh right, one more thing–– Hey, Yatori.」

The flame haired girl who was called turned around. The youth kept his back to her and glanced slightly to the side, and then said nonchalantly:

「You are very beautiful, and I the thought of buying you with money didn't occur to me at all.」

Time froze except for the two subjects. Yatori didn't react for a moment, and then smiled.

「Is that so? Thank you.」

Her response was short and had a hint of warmth. Ikuta didn't say anything more, and just scratched his cheek before leaving and closing the door quietly.

In the room shrouded by silence, Haro looked at the girl beside her and said quietly:

「… I'm so envious of Ms Yatori.」

「Cool your head a little, Haro.」

「No, what happened just now made me really envious– Because that Mr Ikuta… who will hit up any girl directly, complimented your beauty with his back towards you. It was obvious to everyone, even himself, that he was doing so to hide his embarrassment, but he still couldn't help complimenting you.」

It was rare for Haro to express her opinion so forcefully. But the one who was deeply affected by these words weren't Yatori herself, but the Princess who was listening by the side.

「… Dress… Which dress should I pick?」

She pretended to be fine and opened the closet, but she was unable to turn her head back. Before the Princess was confident that she could control her facial expression, she repeated the meaningless action of taking out and putting back her clothes.

There weren't many people in the Mactech red-light district who hadn't heard of the money lender Hazotto of the Gironji third zone.

「Huh! What the hell is this! This much isn't enough to pay the interest!」

And of course, he was infamous for his notrierity. That's because he would collect three times the amount after lending out the money for a month. In other words, he was a loan shark. He was loathed by everyone, but demand for his services would never die out. Hence, Hazotto could survive by feeding off the greed, misfortune and foolishness of others. This had never changed.

「You have to pay back the money you owe, that's obvious! Are you looking down on me? Huh?」

For Hazotto, up until recently, the desperate harlots fleeing in the middle of the night was still a serious problem. That meant a debt remained uncollected. Lending someone money and not getting it back along with the interest– there was no greater tragedy in this world for Hazotto.

「It can't be helped, I will let you off this time! Come back here two weeks later with the interest!」

The woman who shrunk her shoulders out of fear of his angry yell left this shady place dejectedly. Hazotto who was in this barren room with two chairs and on etable glared at the back of the woman as she left, and took a big swig of beer.

「Hmmp… She's probably going to fly soon.」

He wiped the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand and muttered. But he didn't sound worried. Because unlike the past where it was all over once the debtor escaped out of the province, he had other means of clawing back the money.

「I can probably try coercing her the next time…」

When Hazotto was thinking about when he should make his move when the door at the entrance was knocked.

「Enter!」

In response to his words, two woman entered the room. One was a red haired girl with a tight build, the other was a tall girl with marine blue hair. Hazotto didn't know their faces, but from their sari that left little to the imagination and incredibly thick makeup, he could tell that they were harlots. More importantly, they were both high quality goods.

「This is a money lending business, how much do you two need?」

Hazotto said as he sized them up with his gaze. The taller girl took a step forward and answered.

「Erm… Well… We… don't want to borrow money…」

「Huh? You don't want money? Then why are you here? Make it clear!」

「I want you to help us flee from this province… I heard that this place accepts such requests.」

Hazotto smiled wryly in his heart when he heard that. Such cases had been on the rise lately. He didn't need to proposed it himself, and the prey would visit after hearing the rumours.

「… Who did you heard this from?」

「A certain lady from the red-light district… But she asked to remain anonymous.」

She was talking about a co-worker, but the terms she used seemed so distant– Hazotto was confused, and the tall girl explained after noticing his doubt.

「E-Erm… Actually, we are not officially a part of the red-light district yet.」

「What are you saying?」

「Because we were having a tough life, and we thought our only option was to earn money with our body… But I heard that we can find work easily if we move to the neighbouring province. On top of that, the taxes here are high, so…」

Hazotto finally understood after hearing that explanation. He thought that the air around the two of them seemed too innocent for harlots; but since they had yet to work in this line officially yet, he could understand. They probably decided to go down this road but couldn't muster the courage to step over the final line, and happened to heard about a way to escape out of the province at that moment.

—— They think they have a chance to avoid prostituting themselves? Fufu, how naive.

Hazotto suppressed a smile as she thought about how to slaughter the lamb that had come to him. They were both young with impeccable good looks, and would definitely fetch a high price if he sold them to 「there」… Normally, he would only offer this final choice to debt ridden harlots who had been pushed to the brink, but they approached him because they wanted to flee from the province, and wouldn't borrow money from him. Most importantly, if he messed up and they got crushed by the workload, the high price they could fetch would plummet.

「… Are there any outstanding problems in this city? Did you borrow money from elsewhere?」

「No, feel free to check.」

「Good. Can you prove that you are not sick?」

The two women nodded at each other, then took out a board from their bags.

「This is the inspection proof. The grandma in the inspection counter of the red-light district did the inspection.」

「Hmmp, so you came prepared.」

Hazotto wanted to use the excuse of inspection to make them strip, but could only receive the two boards a little dishearteneddly. He read the words carved on the square board carefully.

「Schalke and Lency, age 19 and 22… The checker is Zamikka that stinky grandma?」

Hazotto thought about that old woman known for her pettiness and short temper, and frowned. But contrary to her bad temperment, her skills as a checker was reliable, so he can trust her appraisal. But the truth was, these things were borrowed from harlots that Hazotto weren't acquainted with– After spending some time inspecting it, Hazotto returned the board to the two of them

「Okay, everything seems fine so far. But I will need to prepare on my side too, so come again in three days.」

When Hazotto finished speaking, the red haired woman used this chance to interject:

「We have a request. No matter what means of transportation is used, we want to do so together. If this condition isn't met, we will call the whole thing off.」

Hazotto frowned when he heard her speak so arrogantly. But on second thought, unlike the usual people, they were debt free. He

would lose all the money if they ran off, so he had to take it even if they made some wilful demands. After all, they were his important clients until the moment he traded the two of them for money.

「… Ugh, alright alright, I will arrange it as you wish.」

With a humble attitude that could only be described as a miracle, Hazotto nodded and asked them to prepare the 「administrative fee」. This fee wasn't a big sum, but he will get the real bulk of the deal some time later.

Three nights later, the two of them headed to the suburbs where the carriages were stationed, and got on an old carriage that was waiting there. They left Mactech and headed west, advancing slowly by the far shining luminous Sprite on the carriage.

Including the driver, there were three men, as well as the two women dressed like harlots. Yatori and Haro took turns to sleep in order to keep their guards up, and spent about four days traveling by carriage tensely.

When they finally reach the border of the province, a small settlement that wasn't big enough to call a village appeared before them. The carriage stopped there, and the two women alighted as instructed. They followed the men into a small house far away. Yatori casually stretched her limbs that had grown numb from the carriage trip.

「Go in.」

They entered as instructed, and four men was waiting for them inside. One of them had a machete on his waist, while another was holding an Air Shooter loaded with a Wind Sprite. The other two sitting in the chair around the table weren't armed—— After Yatori

assessed the enemies combat prowess, she waited for the right moment to act.

「These two? The goods this time sure are young.」

「But the goods are high quality this time. Anyway, you two, stand side by side over there.」

After standing in place as ordered, the men checked them out without holding back. Before the men spoke, Yatori took the initiative and asked:

「Are you the ones who will help us to arrange for our migration to the other province?」

「Yes, that's right. I'm responsible before leaving the Ebodolk province, and this man will take care of you after you enter the Kuntsui province.」

From the way they spoke and acted, Yatori could tell that the group before her was different from the men she had been in contact with these few days. Haro who felt the same asked the crucial question boldly.

「We can get official permission to migrate…? I heard that only the authorized officials can grant an entry pass…」

「Are you referring to this?」

The man took out something as he answered. It was several entry permit that had been endorsed with some kind of large stamp. The front page states 「Provincial authorization permit for migration」, only the name field was blank. This was the so call 「Entry Permit」, which was indispensable when moving between provinces.

「We have made the preparation for that, so you don't need to worry about it.」

「– I see.」

This was a permit that should be issued by authorized officials, and the men before her were in the position to safekeep these documents on their person. This was enough to prompt Yatori to take action at this moment.

「... Excuse, that gentleman over there.」

With her mind set, Yatori turned and spoke to the man holding the Air Shooter, and was greeted by a surprised gaze.

「Can you pass me that water canteen? My throat is a bit parched...」

The man had no reason to turn down such a trivial request. He used the hand not holding the Air Shooter to remove the large canteen hanging from his shoulder and walked right over without any signs of wariness. The corners of Yatori's mouth raised to form an arc.

「Take it.」

Yatori reached out both her hands to take the canteen. After performing such a natural reaction...

「Thank you.」

She offered her gratitude as she grabbed his wrist instead of the canteen— before he was even aware of this fact, that man's vision was already upside down.

「Huh–?」

The man lost his conscious after his back hit the ground hard. When Yatori grabbed his wrist and move into his chest, she threw the man with an over shoulder throw. Before the other three could grasp the situation, Yatori rushed the man with a machete on his waist.

「You… You bitch, what are you…!」

The man only drew his machete halfway out of its sheath when Yatori stopped his wrist with her right hand. She then twisted his arm, and threw him onto the floor with an arm lock. As the man fell, Yatori dislocated his shoulder mercilessly.

「Uwahhhh!」

There were terrifying sounds of bones being dislocated along with a scream, but a sharp whistle drowned out both these noises. It was Haro who blew the whistle as a signal. The other two men got up from their chair frantically, but Yatori blocked their paths immediately.

「Give it up, this house has been surrounded.」

But they didn't even have the chance to surrender. Less than five seconds after Yatori gave her warning, a large group of armed soldiers swarmed in.

「Fufufu… This luster, this brilliance… Fufufufu…」

Deep inside the governance building, there was a personal office for the governor. It was a big room filled with high end furniture, and Viscount Thezeni Hamatoll was polishing a small porcelain vase carefully.

「– Pardon my intrusion. Business hours are over the day, Lord Viscount.」

Even after hearing the report from behind the door, Viscount Hamatoll didn't stop his cleaning, and instructed the employee to enter. The First Class Clerk thought poorly of his superior who neglected his work and focused entirely on his hobby, but still reported in a calm voice:

「The documents that requires your approval are all here, please sign and stamp it after reviewing them.」

「Just put them there.」

After Viscount Hamatoll said that, he pointed to a basket in the corner of the room. The documents that were submitted in the afternoon were still lying there untouched, and the First Class Clerk placed the new stack of documents on top of them without betraying any emotions.

「Well then, allow me to take my leave…」 「Clerk Hidashu.」

The clerk who had finished his task was about to leave when the voice of the Viscount came from behind.

「What about those?」

Without any indication of the subject, the Viscount who continued polishing his porcelain vase asked a question. But Clerk Hidashu had gotten used to working under this boss, so he managed to discern the Viscount's intent.

「… We have taken care of it as per your orders. It has been shifted from the current storage place to an underground warehouse further to the north.」

「Good– really, that Third Princess is annoying. I wonder why did she appeared so suddenly and waste so much of my time.」

The Viscount clicked his tongue in disgust, and the clerk felt uneasy as he recalled that uninvited guest.

「… As per the Lord Viscount's orders, we have not put a temporary stop to the deals. Is that really fine?」

「It's the high season right now, this can't be helped… I don't know what that little brat is probing, but it's impossible to see through what we're doing in just a few days. Even if she found out about the rice, I can brush it off with an excuse.」

「But if the officials working on site got caught…」

「Shut up! I said that is impossible! Enough, leave me!」

After hearing the angry roar of his supervisor, Clerk Hidashu bowed with a face that didn't look convinced at all and left the office. The Viscount sat down heavily and snorted unhappily.

「Useless, every single one of them…」

He grumbled. The Viscount calmed his emotions and started polishing the porcelain vase again. However, less than two minutes later, the sound of flustered footsteps filled the corridor.

「What's all that racket!?」

He lift his head with annoyance, and frantic knocking came in the same time.

「Lord… Lord Viscount! We have guests! The Third Princess has honoured us with her visit along with her escorts!」

Viscount Hamatoll immediately stopped his polishing and got up from the chair.

The Viscount hurried to the guest room and found the blonde girl waiting there with her knights. This was a repeat of their previous meeting except for two difference. First, one of the members of the Knight Corps, Torway Remeon, was absent. Second, the Princess Chamille has a tense air about her.

Viscount Hamatoll bowed and took a seat in the chair opposite her before saying timidly:

「This… Your Highness… If you wish for my presence, you can just summon me over at any time. I will ask the servants to prepare tea—」

「No need, I'm not here for tea and idle chatter.」

The Princess refused with a determined tone, and the atmosphere was obviously different from last time. The ominous feeling in Viscount Hamatoll's heart grew, but he still forced himself to smile.

「Pardon my insolence— is there anything pressing matters you need to attend to?」

「I'm here to expose your schemes, let's start with the conclusion— the Kuna rice's harvest isn't poor at all.」

Princess Chamille skipped over the social niceties and attacked the core of the enemy. The Viscount's smile turned stiff.

「In the basement of an abandoned building about 20 km northwest of the Fourth Granary, a portion of the rice that was probably shifted out from the granary was found there. The labels indicating their origins had been torn off, but the grains are glittering new rice, so there is no mistaking it.」

How did you find it so quickly— The Viscount barely stopped himself from saying that. However, the Princess spoke in the stead of the Viscount anyway.

「Don't you think it's incredible? Why was it found so quickly… It's true that there are plenty of place to hide the rice in the province. Even if we can get the support of Colonel Mirtog's soldiers to search, there is a limit to the manpower we can mobilize. If we are to search every suspicious house everywhere and pry up all the floorings, there won't ever be enough time.」

「……」

「Hence, I intentionally give up the initiative. Instead of searching for the hiding spots, we looked for the people that would visit them, picked a few obvious path to ambush and keep up surveillance. I was hoping that you will take some action after my interrogation earlier. 」

The governor who realised he made a mistake twisted his lips. To be careful, he ordered the rice to be moved to another hiding spot— and that was the move that brought him down. The Viscount finally understood that.

「Assuming that the cargo would be moved by wagons, I chose the main roads and set up roadblocks there, using the reason that we are looking for bandits. And we hit a jackpot— and of course, we didn't arrest the rice wagons on the spot. We let them pass through the roadblock and tailed them to the secret warehouse. I believe that isn't the only secret warehouse, correct?」

「… You misunderstand—」

「It's still too early for you to explain, Viscount. I'm not here to accuse you of embezzling the Kuna rice.」

Viscount had prepared all sorts of excuses, but they fell on deaf ears because of what the Princess said. She cast her icy, piercing gaze at the governor who had turned stiff.

「The poor harvest of the Kuna rice is a farce. Therefore, the tax increase that supposedly happen because of that happens for another reason, correct? Including this incident, I'm here today to expose your scheme.」

「…… Ugh…!」

「The whole matter is complicated, so I will go about in sequence— basically, the thing I felt strange from the very start is the imposition of the 『tax targeted against woman』. Levying heavy taxes against women who earn less than men is not an effective way to generate more taxes. Just increasing the taxes in a normal way makes more sense. I'm sure you are aware of that too? So I have to rack my brains… What do you need to do to make this situation benefit you. 」

The Princess expressed her thoughts smoothly. The logical light in her eyes pressured the man before her.

「And of course, just thinking about it wasn't enough. I headed to the red-light district which is hit by the taxes the hardest, and observed the situation there— When I heard rumours that women burdened with debts there were fleeing out of the province, I finally found the correct line of thought… I won't find the truth in the Ebodolk province alone. Because this scheme is only possible by going beyond the Ebodolk province and colluding with the neighbouring Kuntsui province.」

Princess Chamille paused to gather her thoughts, then continued:

「Back then, I remembered… According to the official records, the Lucini flu epidemic has been running rampant in the Kuntsui province since five years ago. It's not fatal, but it is very contagious, and the symptoms include fever, headache, stomachache and others. Those who are malnourished might even become susceptible to dangerous life threatening diseases. Another trait of the disease is that women catch it easier than men.」

The Princess clenches her hands with a gloom on her face.

「Because of this disease, the population of women in the Kuntsui province had fallen drastically. And of course, it's not possible to raise the next generation without women— the sense of impending doom has probably reached its peak… Viscount Hamatoll, that's what caught your eye.」

Her tone changed from sorrow to fury, and she looked at the governor with intense eyes.

「And now, the residents of Kuntsui province wants women even if they have to pay a large sum for them. In other words, women can be sold for a high price. Sensing a business opportunity from this, you tried to sell them to the neighbouring province while keeping the entire thing low key. This is the real reason why you imposed the levy against women!」

The investigation has finally reached the core of the matter. The Viscount's knees started trembling like mom's spaghetti.

「You lured the women troubled by debts to flee to the Kuntsui province… Even harlots are a source of tax income, but when you learned about the situation in the Kuntsui province, you thought of a more efficient way to sell them for money.」

「… Ughhh… Ahhh…」

「The actual process is like this— the harlots who can't raise the money to pay for the taxes will turn to the loan sharks. Their debt will keep increasing until it is impossible to pay it all back. When the loan shark determined that it is impossible to collect any more money, they would suggest that they migrate to the Kuntsui province… Even though the loan sharks has to relinquish this debt, that's not a problem because the mastermind will pay an administrative fee to the loan shark that is taking part in human trafficking as the middleman. It's not a big sum, but it's advantages to the loan shark. It's just a trivial amount, but they are happy that someone is buying a client they couldn't squeeze any more money from.」

Just saying it felt revolting. The Princess bore with this discomfort and carried on:

「The harlots who were sent to the province boundaries by the loan sharks would be sold to the buyer in the Kuntsui province without even knowing what was happening to them… The buyer will probably resell the women to another trader. Anyway, the mastermind will get the profit earned here. Aside from the small fee for the loan shark, the bulk of the money will stay in their hands. And it is a substantial amount, because the clients in the Kuntsui province suffering because of the Lucini flu epidemic wants to buy women even if they have to pay a high price– anything wrong so far, Viscount Hamatoll?」

The Princess who had been giving a long speech up until now stopped for the first time and waited for a reaction. After a long pause, the Viscount who finally got the chance to speak pulled his faltering fighting spirit together and started proclaiming that he was maligned.

「This– This is outrageous! All this is baseless nonsense! You are accusing me of making money from human trafficking? Where is the proof!? Pardon me for saying so, but all these accusations are just Your Highness' speculation, correct?」

In response to his counter argument, Princess Chamille took out a thin object and flinged it hard onto the floor.

「I won't confront you so directly if it is just speculations… You should know what this piece of board is, correct?」

Viscount Hamatoll squainted his slightly myopic eyes, and stared at the object by his feet.

「This seems to be… the provincial entry permit issued by government officials? What's wrong with it?」

「This is confiscated from the human traffickers at the province borders. Does the name Second Class Clerk Makinro Tangona ring a bell?」

「…… Ughh!」

「This board alone is too weak as evidence. You might claim that this was stolen or a counterfeit. However, the ones conducting the human trafficking is a staff working in this bureaucratic building. We have him under custody right now. How are you going to defend this?」

Viscount Hamatoll couldn't believe it. In such a short period of time, the investigation has already reached the province borders where the trade was conducted…

「… That's… That's done by my subordinate behind my back! I swear by the patron god Alderamin, that I'm completely uninvolved with this matter!」

「You want to push the responsibility to your minions? We have already gotten the testimony from the Second Class Clerk of your involvement in human trafficking.」

「Because his sentencing will be more lenient if he claims to be working under my orders, that testimony is just a sham! Your Highness, it’s such a shame! Compared to the words of a direct descendant of the noble House Hamatoll, Thezeni Hamatoll, the House that has served the Empire for 400 years, you give more weight to what a commoner Second Class Clerk says?」

「Pushing the responsibilities to others to claim leniency? Your position is no different from him. In that case, the testimonies from both sides can’t be trusted… But this incident involves two provinces and too many people, it’s unnatural to assume that a mere clerk is behind all this. Isn’t it more probable for someone with the corresponding status to plan and run the actual operation?」

The sound of the Viscount gritting his teeth could be heard. No matter what the Princess said, the option of admitting the truth didn’t came to mind.

「So you want to force this crime onto me no matter what…? In that case, I have no comments! This humble one will also investigate the human trafficking incident. If Your Highness have no other pressing matters, I will need to ask you to leave!」

The Viscount expressed his refusal angrily, but Princess Chamille could already tell his intentions. He wants to chase outsiders away, then destroy the evidence. If they don’t resolve this right now, it will become problematic— that was what she thought, but she was hesitant to make her next move. At this moment, the raven haired youth interjected:

「Isn't that fine, Princess? Since the Viscount already said that, let's go back.」

「Solork…? No, but…」

「Since the Viscount claims that he knows nothing about human trafficking, that must be so. But even so, we will need to interrogate the criminal who lied again. If he continues to lie, we will have to start torturing him. What do you think, Matthew?」

「Ohhh– That's true, let's do that. We already caught the criminal after all.」

The Princess was stunned by their conversation. The Viscount also said in a panic.

「W-Wait a minute, you are the son of Colonel Mirtog, right? If the military apprehended our staff, I hope you can hand them over to us. Because prosecuting crimes does not fall under the jurisdiction of the army.」

「Ehh… No, we can't do that. Because the Kuna rice managed by our unit is involved.」

Matthew shook his head. Ikuta ignored the confused Princess who couldn't tell what they wanted to do, and continued their act.

「The food inside the Fourth Granary are meant to be rations for the military during emergencies. Lord Viscount, you know that, right? As the food was moved without permission, that would mean embezzlement of military supplies. In that case, this should be handled as a military matter.」

「The connection between human trafficking and the embezzlement of Kuna rice has not been established yet! I'm telling you that my side will investigate all these matters, don't you understand!?」

「Even if you say that, we have already obtained information about the Kuna rice from that clerk, and he knows about the secret warehouse too… Given the current situation, it's unnatural to insist that these two incidents aren't related, correct?」

The Viscount was stumped. The Princess understood at this point that Ikuta and Matthew's concessionary attitude was for the sake of launching an attack from another angle.

「Speaking of extraditions, we will probably be submitting requests to you. Aside from the testimony that 『I did everything according to Viscount Hamatoll's orders』, Clerk Tangona has yet to give up the names of any other accomplices. But we can't ignore the possibility that his colleagues are also a part of the plot. If new names comes up during the interrogation, we will need to bring them in for questioning.」

「What…!」

「The suspects we find might all claim to be 『acting on Viscount Hamatoll's orders』. But those are false testimonies, right? In that case, we have to put them through harsh interrogation to get the truth. Sigh, what a pain…」

Ikuta crossed his arms and groaned in pretense. After a while, the youth made his next move.

「… Ah, but how about doing it this way? Can you investigate on your side, and hand over all your suspects to us in one go. In that case, it will save us the trouble of coming over to pick them up whenever a new name comes up.」

When the tension reached its climax, Ikuta proposed a compromise that was surprisingly advantagous to the Viscount. The Viscount couldn't decide how to response.

「Of… Of course, we will perform an investigation on our side too… 」

「Yes, we will be counting on you. As for us, since the matter has gotten so big… Matthew, what did your father say?」

「He won't let the matter rest unless he apprehend the entire criminal gang. That's what he thinks, Lord Viscount.」

Catching what Ikuta was trying to do, Matthew answered immediately, Ikuta continued with a satisfied smile:

「– Alright then, since the Lord Viscount is not involved with the human trafficking scheme, then the mastermind must be someone else. In that case, a possible scenario would be many high ranking officers conspiring together to pull this plot off… That would be a more reasonable script, correct? The Princess will accept such an outcome too.」

「… Oh, I understand now.」

Viscount Hamatoll who felt he had the good end of this deal crossed his arms and started to think. If he chose and offer up sacrifices of enough calibre, the other party would let the matter rest– the Viscount who interpreted the proposal that way thought it was great that his subordinates were absent.

On the other hand, Princess Chamille who was watching him felt a strong displeasure tumbling in her chest. Making the Viscount's subordinates the scapegoats for the entire matter— she would never accept such a farce… However, the Princess knew that Ikuta and the

others wouldn't want things to end like that. They must have laid some sort of trap behind this conversation.

「It will be fine, Your Highness.」

Ikuta placed his hand on her shoulder and reaffirmed her trust. The Princess made a snap decision and nodded.

「… I understand, let's do it that way.」

Viscount Hamatoll was relieved to hear her say that. His opponent was saying: 「We will stop pursuing the truth behind this matter, so offer me a price that will let me save face」 – in other words, they want to resolve the matter through negotiations.

For the Viscount who didn't want others to probe his thoughts, this was the best way for him to exit the stage— After all, he wouldn't lose too much even if he deserted all his subordinates. However, it will be problematic if they said anything unnecessary when they got handed over. In that case, it would be better to let people in 「that trade」 handle it.

「… If the suspects I hand over… are corpses. Would that be fine?」

The Viscount asked as he consolidated his thoughts. This was just a natural question for him. But Matthew and Ikuta both raised the corners of their lips. The next instance the door behind the governor who didn't realized he had been master baited was kicked open.

「Are you selling us out to save your own hide!?」

A shrill voice rang out. First Class Clerk Hidashu barged into the room with a disgusted face and shouted. The Viscount turned around in surprise. This person— was the man the Viscount planned to sculpt into the mastermind of the human trafficking scheme, the head of

the high ranking officers who had authority on par with the governor.

「Wait, Hidashu――」

「Stop kidding me! If you are selling me out, then I will confess to everything! Be it the Kuna rice embezzlement or human trafficking, all these are done by your orders!」

Clerk Hidashu shouted with a shrill voice as he pulled out a document and showed it to everyone. It looked like some kind of contract, and seemed to be endorsed by Viscount Hamatoll himself.

「Look! I have plenty of evidence with me! We might be the ones who did the dirty work, but you are the one who gave the instructions! Don't think you can get away with this!」

The Clerk who lost his cool because of the betrayal exposed his superior's crimes loudly. The Viscount wanted to make excuses, but he saw another person behind his yelling subordinate. A tall handsome youth who was just standing there since he had nothing else to do— the only member of the Knight Corps who was absent, Remeon・Torway.

「... You... You brats! Is this your plan from the beginning...」

The Viscount only realized he was fooled at this moment. But it was too late now. No evidence could trump the testimony fo his closest aide. And the truth was, the Princess never wanted to resolve the matter through negotiations in the first place. The Viscount had lost at the very moment he misunderstood this.

「... I see. I wasn't informed of this in advance, so that was the plan.
」

Princess Chamille's stared at the governor with a sharp gaze. Viscount Hamatoll who was trying to get his subordinate to shut up turned around with a stiff face.

「Your… Your Highness… This is…」

「Enough, I don't want to waste the time that has been saved.」

The Princess said with disdain, then stood up and announced coldly:

「Viscount Thezeni Hamatoll. You abused your station to amend the laws, and even got involved in illegal human trafficking. Prepare yourself for the appropriate punishment. However— before all that, I want to clarify something. Why did you do something so foolish?」

Both the crime and the criminal had been revealed, and the situation has progressed to questioning the motives. The Viscount realized there was no way for him to cover up his wrongdoings, and his eyes turned bloodshot and started wavering.

In this dangerous situation, the Viscount panted a few times— he suddenly picked up the porcelain vase on his table, then took large strides towards the Princess.

「Please… Please accept this! This is the highest quality Shena white porcelain! Just one vase cost 1,000 gold coins!」

「… What…?」

「If that isn't enough, are you interested in paintings? Or sculptures? Maybe gold accessories? Pray tell me whatever you wish for, this humble one will prepare it for you…!」

The Viscount rambled on with a toady smile, and the Princess' face grew even stiffer.

「This… You are trying to bribe me, right…」

「Bribing is such a offensive way of putting it! I just want to show my sincerity—」

Spurred by the displeasure welling up within her, the Princess swung her arms out of spite and smacked down the porcelain vase offered by the Viscount. The vase made by famous artisan smashed into terrible pieces by the Viscount's feet.

「Showing your sincerity through bribes… Why don't you understand that such a thinking is a mistake!」

The yell was almost a scream. At the same time, the self restrain of the Viscount who was looking at the debris of the white porcelain broke down.

「What– What's wrong with that!? You ignorant brat raised in a glass house, as if you know everything! Those hookers use the excuse of being single and don't pay taxes properly! Their existence themselves disrupts public order, and give birth to bastards wilfully! There are a tumor for the entire province!」

He threw his composure and etiquettes out of the window. The ironic thing was, this was the first time that Viscount Hamatoll said what he really thought without any falsehood.

「That's why I went out of my way to lure those vermins to the neighbouring province that needs women! There is no reason to fault me for getting some kickback for this arrangement! The basics of governance is to provide adequate supply to handle demands!」

Showing a strong but illogical attitude was the Viscount's biggest mistake of his life. The Princess felt something inside her snapped.

「… You… are calling…」

The girl muttered with her head low, and her tightly clenched fists were creaking.

「… You are calling the action of trading the people you should be guiding and protecting for money… governance!?」

The Princess raised her hands and snatched the crossbow on the dark haired youth's shoulder. She pulled the bowstring taut and loaded a bolt. She had learned how to use some weapons during her time living in a military base.

「Hyiii…!」

The Viscount backs away out of fear of the killing intent. The Princess took aim at his chest.

「S-Stop! Even a royal can't lay their hands on a governor…!」

「Wrong! Not only did you enact laws for your personal gains, you even tried to bribe a royal! These insults is enough for me to execute you!」



Her finger was on the trigger. The Viscount was intimidated by her fierce aura, and kept backing away until his waist hit the table hard, then fell on his butt. The Princess adjusted her aim downwards to match her target's movements.

「Huff… puff…! S-Stop…!」

「Are you afraid!? That's right, be afraid! After all, if you know where you will fall into, you will understand that you won't get any peace after you die!」

Her words were quivering… How easy it would be if she just needed to accuse the man before her? However, the Princess knew the truth. She knew where the root of the corruption lies; and that the rotting of the leaves were merely a reflection of the Eternal sprite Tree's condition.

「But don't worry, I will be joining you there in the future— so go there first and burn in hell as you wait for me!」

She squeezed the trigger. The loose bolt flew in a straight line through the air, and pierced deep into its destination.

「… Huff… Ahh… Uwah…!」

His entire face broke out in cold sweat, and his pee wet the carpet… The bolt hit slightly to the side of the Viscount's temple, as he sat on the ground with his back to the table. If it landed just 2cm to the left, he would be dead.

「… I didn't want to stop you either…」

The hand of the youth who created this 2cm gap was still gripping the crossbow from the side. Seeing the Princess glaring at the Viscount as if she was trying to kill him with her glare, Ikuta advised her with a soothing and serious tone:

「But if you execute the Viscount here on the ground of Lèse-majesté, be it justified or not, might harden the parliament's attitude, since their members are aristocrats like him. During this period when we are going to set up and operate a new Regiment, doing so isn't wise.」

「……」

「The human trafficking incident is over. Since the truth has been uncovered, it is your win, Princess… You don't have to bloody your hard earned victory, please stay your hand.」

Her worked up mental state gradually calmed down. The youth's palm covered the Princess' hand that was holding the crossbow. The warmth from his skin slowly soothed her stiff fingers.

「Yatori, Haro, please take the Princess away– We will handle the rest.」

Ikuta said right after taking gently taking the crossbow from the girl. Yatori and Haro nodded and supported the girl from both sides as they left the room. The three remaining Knight Corps members looked at each other, and then shifted their gazes on the two bureaucrats.

「Alright then, Viscount Hamatoll and First Class Clerk Hidashu. I know you are tired, but please cooperate with us. I will acting on behalf of the Third Princess now.」

Ikuta said calmly. After Princess Chamille's hard battle, they had all the initiatives now. The youth approached the dazed Viscount Hamatoll and squatted down to his eye level.

「First of all, that problematic insidious law– levies targeted specifically towards women, please rescind that. Stop all the human

trafficking immediately. And return all the embezzled Kuna rice to the market. You will take on all the debts of the women who were sold to the Kuntsui province too. You understand that you don't have the rights to refuse, correct?」

This was an open threat, but the Viscount had no other option aside from nodding.

「Very good Sir. Next, I want you to promise that the operations of this building will be legitimized, at the very least, no gambling dens in broad daylight. I think you can have the chance of escape being executed for Lèse-majesté if you fulfill these conditions.」

The governor could only nod weakly, but Ikuta pressed on with his attack.

「What I will say next isn't mandatory, and is just a request– But if you want to protect your status as a noble, I will advise you to listen carefully, Lord Viscount.」

When heard that, the Viscount who was no different from an empty husk lifted his head slightly.

「If you limit your sights to the Ebodolk province alone, the money made from the rice isn't bad– but do you know? Another type of crop, corns would be trending soon?」

The sight he saw after raising his head was the face of a delinquent youth ready for negotiations.

In the evening of a certain clear weathered day, a small party was held in the Tetzirich manor. Inside the vast property, many invited guests of varying gender and age, civilian and soldiers were gathered here. This was an outdoor buffet held for friends and family.

Campfires were lit all over the place, and around each of them were people cooking skewered meat and using heated iron griddle to fry rice. Under the bright orange dusk light, the people chatted as they enjoyed the food, and the sound of laughter was ever present.

「– I see, so that's what happened.」

Colonel Mirtog was looking at this scene from his private chambers on the second floor of the manor as he listened to the report by Princess Chamille and the Knight Corps. From embezzling the Kuna rice to create the farce of a poor harvest, the real reason for imposing taxes specifically against women, until the human trafficking to the neighbouring province… The Princess spent a lot of time to explain every detail of this incident.

「As all his schemes has been uncovered, Viscount Hamatolls plan has been completely stopped. The Viscount will have to pay back the debt on behalf of the harlots sold to the neighbouring province, and the Kuna rice that was hidden will be returned to the market with the excuse of shortage in declaration. The taxes will be reverted to the old system– from this result, I conclude that the bonds holding the Colonel back has been undone. What do you think?」

「I'm very glad that things turn out this way. But to think these crimes were all directed by the governor himself… It's fortunate that Your Highness has uncovered the truth. Your have my most sincere gratitude.」

Colonel Mirtog bowed deeply with a smile on his plump face. The Princess nodded to accept the Colonel's gratitude, but her expression had a hint of melancholy.

「I'm happy to be of assistance… But Colonel, may I ask something?」

「Yes, how may I be of service?」

「Regarding Viscount Hamatoll's schemes– the gist of what I told you earlier, did you know about it right from the beginning?」

The air froze. Instead of a question, her tone was closer to affirming something. After a few seconds of hesitation, Colonel Mirtog nodded.

「… It is as you say. This is troubling, I have no excuses for myself.」

「So it's true… Luck did play a part, but an outsider like me managed to uncover the truth in such a short period of time. So a resident in Ebodolk province like you who is aware of the situation here is definitely aware of this incident…」

The Princess replied with a lonely attitude, and Matthew who was behind her took a step forward.

「… If you knew, why didn't you tell us right then? We could have saved the time and effort in investigating this matter.」

「Matthew, sorry for keeping you in the dark too… Indeed, telling you everything is a way too. However, I couldn't make up my mind. The reason is, doing so will be admitting that I'm turning a blind eye to Viscount Hamatoll evil ways even though I knew about it.」

Colonel Mirtog endured his son's gaze and explained with a bitter expression:

「It's a fact that I didn't expose his plot despite knowing the truth. You might even suspect that I colluded with him. So first of all, I need to confirm that the Princess is a smart and far sighted person… and not someone who is blinded by short term gains. This is the reason why I have to let you resolve this incident by yourself… without involving house Tetzirich.」

「Dad, is that why you didn’t say anything…? I can understand the rationale, but I can’t accept it. You used the authority of Her Highness to resolve the issue, but privately, you… that’s too despicable!」

「You are right, Matthew. I placed ‘honesty at a lost’ and ‘being despicable with benefits’ on a scale, and chose the latter. I’m ashamed of my lowly greed… As a father and a soldier, this is a great shame.」

Colonel Mirtog turned to the Princess, got down on his knees and lowered his head. Seeing the Colonel accept his son’s accusation without flinching, Princess Chamille shook her head in silence.

「Please don’t mind, I’m not blaming you… I’m aware of the position you are in, and it’s hard for you to step up and fault Viscount Hamatoll for his actions. Aside from maintaining cordial relations with the residents, you also need to be on good terms with the governing officials in order for the military to operate here smoothly.」

「……」

「I can easily imagine how troubled it must be for the soldiers caught between the citizens and bureaucrats. However, you still see my visit as an opportunity and made use of it despite your dire position… I don’t think I had been tricked, and want to compliment your tenacious character instead.」

Princess Chamille walked towards the Colonel who remained kneeling, and took his hand. He then pulled him up and looked into his eyes from a close distance and said:

「No need to continue apologizing, this will make me feel bad.」

「Your Highness…」

「After going through this incident, I have evaluated your capability, Colonel Mirtog Tetzirich. You are definitely a candidate capable of taking on this heavy responsibility. The operation of the Regiment involves the lives of many soldiers, us, and 4,000 Shinaak tribespeople… I will be counting on you for that.」

Her eyes shining with determinations stared right at Colonel Mirtog. Encouraged by this light, the current head of the Tetzirich house straightened his back, and performed a simple salute that had heavy implications behind it.

「I hear and obey the Third Princess orders– Imperial Army Colonel Mirtog Tetzirich solemnly swear to devote my all to the operations of the Regiment as long as I still draw breath.」

After the report was completely, the Princess and the members of the Knight Corps decided to join the outdoor buffet on the recommendation of Colonel Mirtog. Everyone stepped out of the manor, and the commoners who noticed the Colonel coming approached with wine glasses in hand.

「Isn't that the Colonel? We got to live a good life thanks to you.」

「The young master is all grown up! He must have inherited that belly of his from his father, hahaha…!」

Everyone spoke to them intimately. Both the Tetzirich father and son were overwhelmed with just the greetings. Not wanting to disturb them, the other Knight Corps members and the Princess left the scene quietly.

「The Colonel and Ma-chan looks busy, let's help ourselves then.」

「That's right! My stomach is already rumbling.」

「Me too. I will get the beverages then.」

After things became like this, Torway, Haro and Yatori took action. Outsiders must be very prominent here, and they were assaulted by the locals with questions whenever they went near a group. The three of them would probably take a long time to accomplish their goals.

「… You seemed to have given the Viscount very harsh conditions?」

Drowned out by the noise around them, Princess Chamille said to the youth beside her in a quiet voice. Ikuta responded with a nonchalant face:

「Yes, I used that chance to squeeze the most of him, the future of the Shinaak tribe is at stake after all. Unlike the princess, I'm not opposed to acting like a delinquent.」

「You don't need to act like the bad guy. The mastermind behind this incident is me after all.」

The Princess concluded in a strong tone. Seeing how stubborn she was, Ikuta sighed softly.

「… Indeed, the fundamental idea of asking 『Colonel Mirtog to take charge of the unit』 didn't came from me, but is proposed by the Princess. I offered my assistance since it suits me just fine… But all that is just one part of setting the scheme for 『that』, correct?」

Ikuta asked as he reminiscing the past– when the Princess confessed her wish inside the carriage when they were alone. The Princess' wish that went beyond common sense… To guide the Empire that was on its last legs towards a worthy defeat.

「I won't tell you before you make your decision.」

The girl rejected him coldly. Ikuta expected such a reaction and didn't press the issue. After their conversation stopped here, they changed to another topic.

「Speaking of which, holding a party open to commoners in the manor of the unit commander… As expected of the Tetzirich house.」

Ikuta was impressed as he watched the Tetzirich father and son warmly receive the neighbouring residents. As they weren't too far away, he could catch bits of their conversations.

「There seems to be more homeless people in town recently…」 「Pack of wild dogs are attacking our livestocks, can you help us?」 「Because of the cotton imported from the neighbouring provinces, the price has plummet…」 「The daily pay for temporary labour is too low, it is troubling–」

Centered around the troubles of daily lives, they chatted about a wide range of topics. The Princess who was watching the same scene suddenly said:

「Don't you think this is strange? The problems that should be handled by the governing officials are being entrusted to the soldiers as if this is only natural.」

「The problem is that many imperial citizens don't find this strange at all.」

When she heard Ikuta's sarcastic comment, Princess Chamille nodded with a serious face.

「… That's right, this isn't just happening in the Ebodolk province. There might be some differences, but this is a common sight all over the Empire. The commander in the north who has the backing of

aristocrats was acting as the defacto governor, although that is a unique example… But a similar structure can be found in all the territories and provinces. The citizens would rely on the military for all sorts of things, and the soldiers become the ones tending to the citizens request while the aristocrats leeched above both parties. Such a social structure is commonplace in the Empire.」

Ikuta listened to the Princess and stole a glance at the side of her face. Even though there was a bustling scene before her, the girl seemed to be looking far into the distance at a foreign nation.

「I spent most of my time between three and twelves years old in Kioka. I mentioned that to you before, right? But I was really busy when I was being used as a political bargaining chip. Whenever there was an political crisis, I would be chased out, so I spent a lot of time traveling back and forth between Kioka and the Empire… And I would pass through the eastern territories during my journey– which is now the 『former』 eastern territories. You can probably imagine, that was the eastern territories that had been half abandoned after the migrants were sent there to develop the area as part of our national policy.」

The Princess closed her eyes and the scene from the past played back in her mind. Her voice started quivering from henceforth.

「I could tell how terrible the living conditions were just by looking from the carriage window. Their eyes were bloodshot, they were so thin that their collarbones were showing, their gums were swollen and their teeth had all fallen off… To me, the people ravished by hunger and illness looked just like another species.

They only passed by from a distance… But during one trip, they stopped at a village to replenish their supplies, and the entire convoy was surrounded by hungry citizens.」

The girl hugged her shoulders as if she was shivering, but she dug up her memories stubbornly.

「I didn't know what they wanted, probably just some food and medical supplies. But the escorting soldiers probably don't want the royals to feel uneasy in future trips, and sternly rejected their request. They even shouted 『Back off! This is the convoy escorting the esteemed Third Princess!』 and something like that…」

A sudden gust of wind ruffled the girl's blonde hair and covered her tense face.

「I felt really uneasy when I heard those angry shouts… Compared to being surrounded, I felt pained by my own powerlessness. Towards myself who couldn't offer anything to the starving citizens, I felt despair and insignificance. I couldn't stand it being unable to offer anything to the starving citizens, and the feeling of insignificance and despair.」

Ikuta gritted his teeth when he heard that… While the royals living in the Empire became more and more corrupt, only the Third Princess who was raised in Kioka was nurtured into a ruler with the right sense of values. It was so ironic that it was revolting.

「– That's why, I… I decided to get down. I alighted from the carriage and came outside…」

Her limbs started trembling, and her speech was stuttering, as if her body was refusing to go on.

「… When I appeared before the crowd, their gazes all focused on me. It was obvious that will happen, but, I was still afraid– Because I thought they would blame me. In the place where the results of poor policy planning was running rampant, it was only natural for a royal who just waltz in nonchalantly to be admonished by them. So I was

prepared to endure anything that they throw at me…! To accept all their frustrations and hate, and understand how much of a failure I was– And then think carefully about what I can do for them–」

In contrast with the words gushing out from her mouth, the girl's quivering reached its climax– and the next instance, she quiet down as if all that was a dream.

「– But no one accused me.」

Ikuta then saw… the Princess' lips showing limitless self mockery.

「No accusation. That's right, nothing happened. I was mentally prepared and my body was tense, but their gazes swept by me without stopping– They started pleading with the soldiers again. Yes, that's right– I couldn't even get any of the blame. The noises grew louder as they ignored me, and I stood there in a daze without anyone acknowledging my existence…」

This memory branded a wound that would never heal in the girl's heart, and her eyes that had lost their light wandered at the cloud in the air in the distance.

「In the beginning, I thought I was ignored because I was just a child… But even when I despatched an older nobleman to mediate, the results were the same. The people only focused on the soldiers, and didn't even look at us. I quickly realized– the citizens didn't expect anything from me. No, they already expect nothing from the nobles who rules by the authority granted by the royals, or the royals of the Eternal sprite Tree themselves.」

「……」

「Thinking about taking responsibilities was just a lack of self-awareness. I had already lost the rights to take the blame. Despite

the endless stream of terrible policies, the people didn't even feel that they had been 『betrayed』 by the nobles and royals who were the cause of all these problems… Because the people never trusted them from the start. Because they had given up, and think the rulers of this country is just an existence of this level. There are few that realize this– but in this country, 『respect towards those of high standings』 is equivalent to 『complete lost of faith』. Do you understand, Solork? The people might revere the nobles, but don't trust them. Even if there are respect, they expect nothing. The people fear us like gods, and expected nothing from us, just like the gods.

Since 『The Three Loyal House』 served the royals and rebuilt the nation, all the crisis were resolved by soldiers. The nobles and royals not only rely on the soldiers, they even leech on them while living in peace and leisure. But they didn't forget to throw their authority and weight around, and induced fear and respect to the citizens that didn't match the facts… And the heir of this corrupted bloodline is me. It's impossible for me to possess the dignity and sense of responsibility that befitted such a station…」

The youth didn't know what to say to the Princess, and she continued holding his hand tight. So tight as if she didn't want to let the youth go.

「That's why, Solork… When we first met, you displayed negative emotions towards a royal like me… For me who couldn't even gain the hatred of the citizens, that disdain of yours saved me.」

The Princess felt that even hatred was precious to her. Ikuta finally understood why she continued holding on hopeless confusion and lived a hellish life.

「But even so… Since the day we met, I can't do anything that made you happy. That's the only thing I can't apologize for… But at the very least, you still hate me right? Your hatred towards me is still hidden deep inside me, along with your will to punish me for my sins–」

Just like that time when the youth faced the dead, he had no words… The only thing he could do was hold the girl's trembling hands. And held them tight as she wished, bonding them together so they won't be apart.

Chapter 2:

Bubble-like Days

The cawing of the chicken stirred Meraize from his deep slumber.

「Ughh… It's already morning huh… Okay!」

He blinked because of the morning sun shining through the gap in the curtain, and patted his own cheeks to wake himself up. The children sleeping on the straw mat on the floor also woke up one after another.

「Guwah… Good morning Papa…」 「Hmmm… I will draw the water…」

The eldest daughter who stood up with sleepy eyes picked up the bucket that had not much water and headed to the entrance. Meraize almost watch her go off, but realized the mistake when she opened the door.

「Wait, Chakiri. You should go that way, the well is to the back.」

「Hmm…? … Oh, right. We don't need to go to the river now.」

The eldest daughter who understood what her father was saying quickly turned around. While they were speaking, Meraize's wife who fell asleep with the young third son in her arms woke up too.

「Morning Hubby… I will make breakfast.」

「Oh, it's fine, sleep a while more. I will make do with some bread.
」

「No, you can’t. Mdm Hanna said that you will get tired easily if you don’t eat your vegetables. It will be done in no time, so just sit tight with the kids– Jibo, can you light the fire in the stove?」

His wife asked her fire Sprite partner to help and hurried into the kitchen. Meraize watched her back and smiled wryly.

After eating the simple but slightly varied breakfast, Meraize and his eldest son left the house and prepared to work in the field. On the way to the field, his water Sprite partner Eku chatted with him from behind.

「Meraize, you seemed meatier lately.」

「Hmm? Oh, because there are meat and vegetables in my meals now. And the wives group will send us sumptuous lunches at noon too.」

Meraize answered as he looked towards the sky. Before him wasn’t the peak of the Grand Arfatra Mountain covered by clouds, but endless blue skies that seems to stretch on forever. It’s the same when he lowered his gaze, the flat plains without any obvious undulations spread in all four directions.

「… How ironic, we were chased out of the mountains, but our lives here are easier than before.」

He muttered with complicated emotions. This place, the Yunakura province, was located in the east of the Empire. But with the Kioka invasion of the eastern territories, many residents fled westwards. This resulted in a drastic fall in the population of the entire province.

The farms were abandoned due to a lack of manpower, but the Shinaak refugee who migrated here by the military’s arrangement started tending to the fields again. New families moved into the

deserted houses, and the Yunakura province gradually turned into the new home of the Shinaak.

「Nokuku, we will be breaking the ground today. The fields are really big, so brace yourself.」

「You should watch yourself instead, Dad. Don't get too excited and sprain your back like last time.」

「Why you little…」 When he heard his son said something so rude, Meraize poked his son's forehead with a laugh.

Father and son tilled the field until the sun reached its peak. A group of women holding cloth bundles came to the two of them.

「Ara～ Meraize and Nokuku! You two are sure working hard!」

The ones walking at the head of the group was a woman wearing a large luggage on her back with ease. The luggage was so large that a horse would probably give up on carrying it. It was Hanna Tetzirich. Behind her was the members of the 「Wives group」 mutual support group, which includes Meraize's wife.

「We brought your lunch today too! You two must be hungry, so eat up!」

She said while placing her bundle onto the ground, and in them were three pots containing rice and other cooked food. The other women also took out vegetables and fruits from their bundle and placed it on the ground. Nokuku who was starving after performing hard labour cheered.

「Thank you, Ms Hanna. Please take care of my wife.」

Meraize stopped his work and stood up, then bowed towards Hanna– Hanna's wife group was a mutual support group formed

around women who couldn't work in the field because of ill health or a weak constitution. Aside from from preparing meals, they would also take on jobs to mend or make clothing, or take care of young children during the busy period. Meraize's wife has some illness in her chest, so she joined the wife's group when she first moved here.

「What are you saying!? Neighbours helping each other is only natural! Enough about that, eat up! If you keep standing on ceremony, I will hit you!」

Hanna said as she scooped a small hill of rice onto his plate. The Shinaak all look forward to the rice dish the wife group would prepare once every ten days, and Meraize was the same. He received the plate, scoop up the glittering rice with his spoon and shoved it into his mouth.

「It's delicious… Eating a meal after finishing work is the best, isn't that right, Nokuku?」

「Mom, seconds!」

The youth who finished his rice thrust out his empty plate. As his mother filled up a second plate, Hanna pick off a rice on the youth's face and toss it into her mouth.

「Yes, that's right. Eat more so you can grow up big and strong!」

The large hands of the cool lady patted Nokuku's head, and Meraize felt a warmth spreading in his chest when he saw that and smiled. *This is good*… He thought. There were still some in the tribe who had lingering hate towards the citizens of the Empire, but Meraize didn't wish for such emotions to spark off another war.

「If we can live peacefully without clashing with anyone… it will be great.」

He muttered. Getting both the mountains and the plains, and reverting back to their old way of life– this earnest wish that the tribe was willing risk their lives for, had dissipated in the war. Countless brethrens lost their lives in that rebellion, so they didn't want to lose any more things.

It would be great if this isn't just my wish. Meraize hoped sincerely as he watched the smiles of his wife and son.

Sacks that were completely full got unloaded onto the ground with a heavy thud. The flame haired girl responsible for directing this job supervised the unloading and shouted at the farmers:

「We will leave the compost and humus here! Please use them according to the instructions!」

「Oh… right!」「Got it!」「O-Okay!」

The Shinaak responded as they continued farming. Their tones were still stiff, but had gotten much better compared to when they first got here. Leaving the history between them aside, those people were definitely a helpful existence to their lives here– That was how they received the imperial soldiers.

「Just one more week, and this place will turn back into an outstanding field. The Shinaaks really did well.」

Matthew who was standing beside Yatori shared his thoughts. She also nodded with a smile.

「Their tribe farmed in the barren lands of the Grand Arfatra Mountains, so an field that is abandoned for a few years isn't a problem to them. And the crops here are the corns they are familiar with, so it will definitely be even easier to them.」

「That's right… I thought that things would be tough before the first harvest, but thanks to the ample funds, the Shinaaks weren't too troubled by food and clothing. And of course, aside from the budget allocated by the military, we need to thank Viscount Hamatoll and his generous donations.」

Matthew snickered at his own words, while Yatori shrugged quietly.

「Helping with farmwork is a new experience for us too. When will the first harvest be?」

「Probably three more months, but for the field that had been worked on earlier might be ready by next month… Probably. It's my first time growing corn, so I'm not sure either.」

「I'm looking forward to it. I heard the freshly harvested crops are tastier?」

「I think so, my Dad seems to be planning a harvest festival to match the harvest.」

The two chatted and smiled naturally. In terms of 「starting a life in a new place」, they were the same as the Shinaak; However, the new unit led by Colonel Mirtog provided the most comfortable environment they ever had.

By helping with farm work everyday and Hanna's wife group, the friction between the imperial soldiers and the Shinaak had eased with each passing day. It was already clear that they had chosen the right man to be the Regimental commander.

「……Ms Yatori! Ma-chan! We are done here!」

「Everyone from the wife group come on over too! Let's have lunch!」

With the empty wagon in tow, Torway and Haro went towards them from the west side of the field. After hearing that shout, Yatori and Matthew immediately turned back towards their subordinates, and said the words they were all waiting for:

「We are breaking for lunch after unloading all this! Today, we dine with rice!」

Even the farmers cheer when they heard the last part of what they said.

「First Lieutenant! Where are you, First Lieutenant Ikuta!」

The voice of Sergeant Major Suya calling for his superior officer echoed hollowly… She led the platoon to distribute the compost and humus to the farmers early in the morning, and returned to base before noon. She wanted to report that the mission has been completed, but she couldn't find the Ikuta:

「Ahhh, really now! Please give up and show yourself! We will be doing the same mission in the afternoon, I won't let you laze around today! Where are you, First Lieutenant Ikuta!」

「…Ikuta, there's someone looking for you down there.」

「I didn't hear anything~」

The youth gently covered the mouth of his partner on his chest.

The leaves blocked out the glaring sun, and a soothing breeze caressed the body lying on the hammock. The youth was enjoying a temporary paradize.

「Sorry Suya. But I have decided that I will sleep here until evening no matter what anyone says…」

As he muttered to himself, his eyelid began to close… Since the founding of the Regiment, Ikuta kept skipping his work as if he was trying to make up for working so hard in the northern territories. If he put his mind into running away, there were few who could catch him.

「– Hmm, what a coincidence, I want to sleep here today too.」

One of those few exceptions climbed up to his sanctuary. Ikuta pushed his eyelids apart and glance to the side, and saw a girl from the Shinaak tribe standing on a thick branch stemming out from the tree.

「… So it's Nana, you actually found me.」

「Because unlike you people who live on the plains, we are almost looking upwards. But…」

As she was saying that, Nanak shift her gaze away from Ikuta for the time being and looked at the scenery below. It was 20m high here, and she could she the soldiers walking around the base. She then sighed.

「… No one in their right mind wouldn't sleep in a place like this.」

「Yes, I wouldn't recommend this to beginners.」

「Yes– but right now, my mind isn't working right either.」

After saying that, Nanak pushed herself off the branch with her legs, and pounced onto Ikuta who was dangling in mid-air. That surprised the youth, and he hugged her tightly with both arms. The ropes holding the hammock up were swaying between the branches.

「T-That's dangerous…! You could have died, Nana!」

「No, I'm confident that you can catch me.」

Nanak pushed Kusu towards her leg, then hugged Ikuta's body tightly. The sensation of her skin felt magnetic and her nice smell made the youth who had abstain himself from women recently felt an urge to enjoy the moment.

「Hehe, this is just nice. Unless you want to push me down, you can't resist. You are at my mercy now.」

「W-Wait, we can't ignore the safety issue. I don't have experience of doing it at such a height either.」

「Me too. So, you know… it will be dangerous if we don't stick close together, you know?」

Nanak's arms clung onto Ikuta's neck and waist, bringing them even closer. The sensation of her slender fingers brushing against his skin made Ikuta moan troublingly.

「Isn't this nostalgic, Ikuta? This reminds me of that night during the Sprite Thanksgiving Festival.」

「If you want to listen to an old tales, I have much more to share compared to back then.」

「That sounds great, but let's leave it for next time. Even I know what night raid means now.」

Nanak unbuttoned Ikuta's shirt and licked his exposed chest. She looked up at his face as she licked him.

「Do you want to suffer in silence, or react honestly– That's your only two options.」

What luxurious choices– As Ikuta thought leisurely, Nanak hands delved further down. Before her hands reached the place that wasn't a joke, the two entangled people heard a shrill sound and shaking.

「…? What was that just now–」

While Nanak was confused, a second shaking came over with a 「thud」. Ikuta realized what was happening and he grabbed Nanak's shoulders with his face green.

「… Oh no, get off me quick, Nanak. That's the sound of axes felling trees!」

「Chop again!」

A soldier were troubled, but still chop the tree with his axe. With Sergeant Major Suya by her side, a blonde girl with a stern expression was watching this scene– it was Princess Chamille. The two of them looked ahead as the trunk was hit a third time.

「Chop again! You are not doing it hard enough! Do it with the mindset of really felling that tree!」

「Ahh… Okay…」

「No, wait! Belay that order!」

When the Princess was about to order that soldier to continue swinging his axe, a terrible scream came from the top of the tree. She instructed the soldier to stop, then looked up. Shortly after, a familiar youth climbed down.

「Oh, so you were up there? Then tell me earlier, that was dangerous just now.」

「You knew I was there when you did this… Why else would you cut down a tree right in the center of the base?」

「Because Sergeant Major Mittokarifu filed a request to eradicate spots where people might slack off.」

「That's how it is! Alright, let's carry out our mission for the afternoon, First Lieutenant Ikuta!」

Ikuta's deputy pulled his hand and drag him forward. With his moment of bliss disrupted, Ikuta followed with a disdainful face. But when he was about to be taken away, another figure appeared from the tree.

「Hey, the lot of you… why are you disturbing our rendezvous?」

「…Nanak Dar? Why are you…」

The Princess was stunned, but after deducing how things turned out this way, she glared at the youth with a serious face again.

「…Solork! What are Nanak Dar and you doing on that tree!」

「Well, we are old friends, and have many things to chat about…」
「It's too early for you to know.」

Ikuta attempted to cover it up, but Nanak who was one of the subjects made a statement that threw all his efforts down the drain. The Princess' face turned red from embarrassment and rage, while the unhappy Suya took a step past her.

「Wait, Nanak… Please keep your hands off our superior officer.」

「Suya, I can't accept even if this is your request. I will do it again and again. If not now, then at night. If that fail, then tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow..」

「You can't do that! We have to maintain our military discipline!」

「T-That's right! You know the saying when in Rome, do what the Roman do? You can think about frolicking all you want, but don't bother other people!」

Princess Chamille who had reinforcement backing her up shouted loudly. However, Nanak laughed at their argument.

「Stop yapping already. Basically, if you don't want me to snatch this man away, you can make a move yourself.」

「What…!」 「Who… who said anything about that!?」

Nanak headstrong attitude sparked off an argument between the three. The soldiers around them them gathered out of curiosity when they heard the commotion, but the subjects themselves weren't concerned at all.

「… Enough! This is retarded! Basically, this is all because of your frivolous attitude, Solork…」

The Princess couldn't stand this unending squabble, and decided to switch targets. But her voice broke off mid-sentence. That's because she didn't see anyone when she turned towards the one responsible for this problem. A second later, Suya and Nanak also realized that.

「He… He fled!」 「When did he disappeared…!」 「Ikuta, where did you go–!?」

With the clear air of early autumn helping them, the voices of the three of them were carried to an impressively far distance.

「– That concludes the results of the Shinaak refugees migrating to the Yunakura province. We can only know the actual yield after the corns are harvested, but the evaluation for now is that things are going very well.」

Inside the palace erected in the Imperial capital Banhataal. In a corner of the palace, there was a green sanctuary covered in walls made from crushed jade– the Deep Green Hall. The voice of a high

ranking general with eye colour that matched the walls echoed clearly through the entire room.

「Under the watchful eyes of the regiment commanded by Colonel Mirtog, the Shinaak tribe will continue to work as farmers. With the long term goal of the Shinaak tribe and the imperial citizens to live together harmoniously, I hope we can continue to support them.」

「……」

General Remeon and Marshal Igsem were both down on one knee as they reported the progress of the migration project. Before them was the Emperor seated on the throne.

However, it wasn't clear if the Emperor was listening to the contents of the report. His eyes were staring into space, and his fingers that looked like dried tree branches were scratching the armrest of the throne meaninglessly.

「Your Majesty…」

The general who couldn't stand the lack of reaction wanted to raise his head, but a shrill voice interjected:

「What splendid news! And of course, I have always been confident about this project!」

Chancellor Trisnai Izanma who was standing beside the throne did not seek permission from the Emperor, and interjected nonchalantly. General Remeon gritted his teeth, then looked at the Chancellor's face with a fierce expression.

「Chancellor, I'm reporting to His Majesty right now, it is not your place to comment.」

「Right, right! I actually want to stay quietly in the sidelines, but His Majesty seems to be a little unwell today. In that case, I have the responsibility of relaying the Emperor’s opinion on his behalf.」

After usurping the Emperor’s part in this meeting in a more forceful manner than usual, the Chancellor who was claiming to his spokesman said in a completely different tone:

「– After going through the war in the northern territories, Kioka that had allied with the Alderamin nation is becoming a serious threat! Can we overcome this situation by defending like a turtle and focusing on domestic affairs!? The answer is no! Reality isn’t so simple! We can’t be so laxed towards the east! While we are doing this, the enemy is definitely planning their next invasion into our realm!」

General Remeon’s expression gradually grew tense, because he was familiar with the topic and methods that was being employed. Whenever Trisnai summoned the two leaders of the Imperial military in the name of the Emperor and started discussing war— he would always issued instruction leading to a bleak future for soldiers.

「And we can’t let them have the initiative! If there are obstacles ahead of us, then we have to keep proposing counter strategies in order to achieve victory! What is the greatest threat we will be facing in the near future? Please think about that carefully!」

A vein appeared on the general’s temple— That’s right, he knew very well. However, the ones who refused to listen to the opinions of the military were the stubborn Priests of the Aldaramin, and the villainous minister before him.

「That’s right, it’s Blast cannons! We can’t allow Kioka to continue making that terrible weapon! That’s why the Emperor issued an edict— Marshal Igsem and General Remeon! Employ the appropriate

strategy and cut off the source behind the manufacture of the Blast cannons!」

After listening to this voice that agitate his mental state, General Remeon thought about what was said, and asked in a deep voice.

「… Speaking of the conditions of manufacturing Blast cannons, the top priority would be high quality iron. If we cut off their iron supply, that would mean destroying and seizing all the ore mines controlled by Kioka…」

「That's right!」

「Realistically speaking, unless we are going into total war, we can't strike the ore mines deep within Kioka's territory. Then the targets that are tactically possible… There is only one answer.」

General Remeon was worried that his rage would overwhelm his words, and continued:

「To seize back the Hioredo ore mine hill of the former eastern territories— Can I confirm that is the order we have received?」

「That, is, correct!」

Trisnai nodded and bared his teeth in an absolutely brilliant smile. General Remeon felt a chill run down his spine— This was the strange personality that made Trisnai Izanma an unfathomable monster instead of just a villainous minister.

Trisnai was enjoying himself. Enjoying the anguish, pain, and conflicting emotions felt by the soldiers when they received an unreasonable order– He took greater joy in this then the finest wine and entertainment, even more than he valued his own safety and well-being.

「… But why… now…!」

However, no matter what kind of monster he was, General Remeon wouldn't fear him. He knew how insolent it was to disobey an edict, but he still yelled at the top of his voice.

「If you are after the Hioredo mine ore hills, why didn't you give the orders two years ago!? When the eastern territories were still a part of the Empire, when Hazaaf Rikan was still defending our land with his life!? Why didn't we send reinforcements to aid him!? Then we won't need to take it back now! We just need to give that renowned general the order to 『defend the ore mine hills』, the problem will be solved! If we did that, we wouldn't have lost our land and other…!」

The Emperor's shoulders shook violently, probably because it has been a long time since someone spoke so agitatedly towards him. His lifeless eyes were filled with fear as he looked at his vassal's face.

「Ara! You can't do that, General Remeon! Like I said, I'm acting in the Emperor's stead—」

「Shut your mouth! You sly fox! Step away from the throne! That's not a place someone like you may touch!」

His roar was filled with sophistry and his selfless act intimidated that fox.

「Your Majesty! I'm reporting to you! Please hear our words! Please look at us not through others, but with your own eyes! For the longest time, the people in this country had not heard your true voice, please let me hear your words…!」

General Remeon pleaded bitterly with tears in his jade coloured eyes. He was risking his life in the hope that his master who has

become a puppet will regain his senses. Because he believe— that his voice can still reach the Emperor.

「… Ah… Ah…」

「… Your Majesty…!」

The Emperor lifted his hands and grabbed his head. His hair that had turned yellowish brown was pulled out. While he was doing this crazed action quietly, what he said was…

「… Ahhh… Make… Make that… Shut up… Trisnai…!」

The toddler voice called the Chancellor's name. General Remeon crumpled onto his knees, and Trisnai had a smug smile as he swaggered to the Emperor's side.

「Ahh, Your Majesty… How scary… Please don't worry, I will ask the servants to send you back to your chambers.」

The Chancellor soothed the panicking Emperor, then looked at the two high ranked generals with a stern expression.

「You can't do that, General Remeon. If you continue your actions that upsets the Emperor, I will have no choice but to find you guilty of not just Lèse-majesté, but treason.」

「… Compared to me upsetting the Majesty, you made the Emperor lose his heart… Who committed the greater sin…?」

The General who was propping himself with one arm trembled with disappointment and rage. Before his emotions erupted again, the other high ranked general who had remained silent all this while spoke.

「I hereby acknowledge the edict to retake the Hioredo mine hills.」

General Remeon stared at the profile of the flame-haired Marshal with despair. On the other hand, Trisnai's expression relaxed completely.

「Marshal Igsem, I knew you would say that! Oh, that's right, I want to make my only request. The unrest in the northern territories just happened recently, and there are anti-war sentiments within the Empire. To clear such thoughts away, I want to wrap this campaign with a some gold foil. A specific example will be— that heroic group of youths in the last war and the Princess. They would be a suitable procession to rally the people, right?」

Chancellor didn't speak further after that, as if he was done. Marshal Igsem bowed and got up, and said to the general kneeling beside him.

「Stand up, General Remeon. A soldier must carry out all his given orders.」

「……Sol…」

After gritting his teeth one last time, General Remeon who has finally recovered from his depression got on his feet.

He followed the Marshal out of the Deep Green Hall, and stole a glance behind him. He could see two attendants helping the Emperor walk with unstable steps. Trisnai looked on with a casual expression, and the green eyed general cursed that he was in no position to strangle that man.

「… That's right, there is no other choice other than accepting the order… Sol, for a proper soldier at all time like you, you can't…」

His quiet muttering while he was leaving wasn't heard by anyone other than himself.

Two weeks after this incident, the campaign to retake the Hioredo ore mine hill as per imperial edict was officially decided in a war meeting. The members selected as part of this campaign received their mustering orders. After the eastern territories fell, the first campaign against this place was a major amphibious operations involving both the army and navy. The 30,000 mobilized forces include many soldiers who were under the command of the late Lieutenant General Hazaaf Rikan in the old Eastern Stronghold.

A little more than five months after the conclusion of the war in the northern territories, the brief moment of peace ended after this short respite. The soldiers who survived the war after much hardship were thrown back into the fray while the memory of their last battle were still fresh.

And in the fields of the Yunakura province, the corn grown by the Shinaak tribes were ready for its first harvest.

Chapter 3:

The Katjvarna Pirate Navy

Part 1

A group of children chased a ball around in the dust filled air.

They had lost track of the blazing sun and the intense heat, and were only focused on the ball by their feet. It was a simple contest where two groups were trying to kick the ball into the opposing team's goal— But it was enough for the kids to get engrossed in it gleefully.

「Be careful, your hat had fallen off! Put it on properly!」

Under the roof of the building that was facing the plaza, an elderly woman sitting in a rocking chair reminded the children with a worried tone. If she left them alone, they would play until they got a heat stroke. To avoid the negative effect of their endless energy, she was performing her duty as a guardian properly.

「「「「「「Yes, Matron!」」」」」」

The children replied properly and the match was suspended while they ran around the field to pick up their hats. Many of them had been trampled on, but they just dust them off and wore them without any hesitation. The children weren't thinking about anything other then restarting the match as quickly as possible.

「… Huh~? Where is my hat?」

Most of his friends started preparing for the match to restart, but a boy was wandering around because he can't find his hat. Maybe it was blown away by the wind? He couldn't find any signs of it after searching for a while.

「Ugh～ where did it go…」 「Looking for this?」

At this moment, a hat with a brim flew from nowhere and landed on the head of the boy. The boy looked around in surprise, and saw an unfamiliar man wearing military uniform standing at the entrance of the plaza. As he was wearing his military cap low, the boy couldn't see the face of that man clearly.

「Who might you be?」

The startled old lady got up from the rocking chair and asked who the man was. The man took off his hat and bowed in front of the wary children. He revealed his raven hair, dark eyes and unexpectedly young face.

「Long time no see, Matron.」

The man spoke with a warm tone, and the old lady looked pleasantly surprised when she saw his face.

「…Ikuta … It's Ikuta! Ah, heavens…!」

Her legs weren't working well, but the old lady still approached the man with a brisk jog. She almost fell on the way there, but Ikuta was prepared and caught her shoulders in time.

「Ahh… That's dangerous… your legs aren't well, please don't push yourself.」

The old lady in Ikuta's arms pulled herself up, and noticed he was missing a finger in his left hand. She opened her eyes wide in surprise.

「Your little finger…! What happened? A wound from the war…?」

「Hmm? Oh… It's a long story.」

Ikuta pulled his left hand away from the old lady, and seemed to be reflecting on his mistake of letting her notice. Noting that he didn't really want to talk about it, the old lady didn't pursue the matter and shifted her gaze elsewhere.

「Sorry for being so insensitive… Ara, Kusu is following you properly too. It's been a while.」

「Long time no see, Floshira. You have gotten thinner.」

Kusu who was in the pouch replied warmly too. The old lady named Floshira smiled gently.

「Welcome home, both of you— today is a peaceful day in the Solork orphanage too.」

The old lady walked alongside the youth In the forest behind the orphanage. The sound of the playing children grew distant, and only the occasional chirping of the birds could be heard in the lush woods.

「After you graduated, I never imagined that I will see you come back in a military uniform, Ikuta.」

Floshira said with her eyes narrowed. Ikuta also tugged at his sleeve unhappily.

「Me too, Matron. Please stop talking about it, it's depressing.」

「Fufu, that's true. Honesty, it don't suit you at all.」

Floshira said after sweeping her gaze all over Ikuta, and the youth had a face of relief.

「But I heard you performed admirably. You are the first graduate from here to get the title of Imperial Knight… And you went through a tough battle in the north, correct?」

「That was a terrible war. No matter how much compliments I receive for it, it just feels like they are praising my janitorial abilities.」

「Don't put it that way, you did save many lives.」

「Maybe. But I killed many people in the process too… both enemies and allies.」

Ikuta said with disdain. They chatted as they walked, and reached a place filled with tombstones shortly after. In the depths of the woods was a small and serene cemetery.

「… Hmm? There's a new large tomb here, this is…?」

「You remember the former housefather? He had trouble with his lungs for the longest time, and passed away three months ago. We laid him to rest here in accordance with his request.」

「The former housefather… Oh, old man Numaiso?」

Floshira was amused by how quickly the youth's face turned displeased, and chuckled.

「You don't get along with him at all, because he was a devoted Alderah believer…」

「Devoted huh… Never mind, let's assume that's true. There is no point in grumbling to the grave of the dead.」

Ikuta said with a sigh, and walked pass the tombstone that was incredibly prominent. Floshira bowed towards the tomb of the former housefather and followed him. They soon stopped at the eastern corner of the cemetery.

It was a small but proper tomb. It was in the form of a round pillar like the others, but the size was very modest, and a line from a religious scripture that was normally carved onto the tomb was missing. If the tomb they saw earlier was erected to commemorate the accomplishment of the former housefather, then this tomb gave the impression of silence and discretion.

There were only these few words on the white tomb— Here lies Yuka Sankrei.

「Long time no see, Mom.」

Ikuta knelt with a warm smile as he faced the tomb… facing the small tomb where his mother was resting in peace.

「Sorry for being away for so wrong, things are a mess. This might be strange as an apology… But I brought a present.」

Ikuta spoke with a gentle tone that was completely unlike his usual self, and took out something from his bag with one hand. It was palm sized bundle of rice wrapped in thick leaves. Ikuta then poured tea into a small bowl, and placed it before the tomb alongside the rice as an offering. Floshira observed from the side curiously.

「… What is that?」

「It's called rice ball, I heard it's a traditional food from Yaponik. I got some good quality Kuna rice from a friend, so I used the chance to make one using the method my mother told me.」

Ikuta didn't speak anymore after that, and just watched his mother's grave in silence. Floshira stayed with him. After a while, she said suddenly:

「You still won't offer any prayers.」

「……」

「No, it's fine. You always took pride in being a believer of science. But that was the reason why the former housefather ostracized you…」

「… I'm often misunderstood, but even as a believer in science, I'm not an atheist. Since science can't prove that god doesn't exist yet, this is only natural. Unless god declare to me one day: 『I really don't exist』, that will be a different story.」

「Didn't you already heard that? When your mother passed away… 」

Ikuta bit his lips. He didn't answer Floshira's question, and continued:

「… I hate how people stop thinking and think that religion is absolute. But that isn't refuting religion itself, I even think that religion can save people that science couldn't. Because this opranage is mostly dependent on the donations from the Church of Alderah.」

「Yes, I understand. You have always been a sensible child… But I can't help feeling sad. Because when you mourn an important loved one who will never come back, the theory of science won't soothe your heart that refuse to pray…」

The old lady placed her hand gently on the youth's shoulder. As if he wanted to reject being consoled, or maybe he was afraid… Ikuta stood up forcefully.

「… Sorry, Matron. Actually, I can't stay for long.」

「Yes, I understand— you will be joining the next campaign?」

Ikuta couldn't have worn this uniform that didn't fit him willingly to visit his mother's grave. Floshira could sense that he had no choice but to come here like this… At the same time, the old lady also knew that Ikuta didn't made this detour home just to pay his respects to his mother.

「Yes. So before that… I'm here to retrieve that item I left with you.」

Ikuta turned around and said stiffly. Floshira nodded heavily, then reached inside her robes.

「When I heard that you became a soldier, I had a premonition. That the day when I return this to you will come… Ever since then, I have always kept this with me.」

She took out the item, which was a silver craftwork that could barely be held in one hand. Based on the arrow head design on the edges and the hook that stretches out from the inside, it seemed to be an emblem related to the military. Ikuta bowed towards Floshira with gratitude, then took the silver craftwork with a face of disgust.

「… I hope the day that I will need to use this thing will never come. I still think that way.」

「Yes, I understand, I still remember that day when you threw this away— But Ikuta. Is there someone that you have to protect even if you have to abandon your insistence from back then?」

After quite a long time, the youth nodded slightly. Floshira smiled faintly.

「Learning this makes me the happiest today. More than all the great military accomplishments I heard that you achieved.」

「……」

「Please be careful, Ikuta. I won't wish you good hunting, but I will pray… that you and the person important to you will stay safe.」

She held Ikuta's right palm with her wrinkled hands. Floshira's prayer before the small tomb sounded incredibly warm and gentle, and entered Ikuta's ears… Even if these prayers couldn't be conveyed to the heavens, he was still grateful for her thoughts and kindness.

At the same time, in another place. Princess Chamille and the four members of the Knight Corps except for Ikuta mustered as per their orders, and headed to the harbour located in the southern territories of the Empire. Compared to the harbour they visited in order to participate in the Officer Cadet Military Academy screening exam, this was a larger military harbour that was closer to the east.

「Woaahhh, what an impressive sight… This is the first time I have seen so many military vessels gathered together.」

Matthew said in awe when he reached the docks. There were more than twenty mid to large sized naval sail ships in his field of vision, and twice that number of transport crafts floating on the blue sea. Under the cloudy sky were countless masts pointing skywards. Even though the sails were withdrawn as the ships were docked, it was still an awe inspiring sight.

「It seems that 70% of the Katjvarna First Naval Fleet has already gathered here. We will link up with the other 30% of the fleet in some other ports. Are the sailing preparations already complete?」

「We might be making them wait, let's quicken our pace.」

After hearing what Princess Chamille said, the other four nodded and increased their speed. They passed by some seamen who were repairing ships and headed for the sea. They heard a sudden ominous rumble from above— and the next instant, they were assaulted by a sudden rainfall.

「Oh no… It's really pouring…! I can see the flagship that is designated as the mustering point, let's run so we don't get drenched!」

Everyone ran as instructed by Yatori's yell. They ran in the waterfall-like rain for a few minutes, and reached a docked ship that was obviously one size bigger than the other vessels. Two seamen blocked the gangway between the ship and the dock:

「Halt! The five of you over there! State your name and unit!」

「I'm First Lieutenant Yatori Shino Igsem of the 32nd Army Regiment, the other four are with me. Aside from First Lieutenant Ikuta Solork who will report at the next harbour, we are reporting here as ordered.」

Yatori gave her name as she took out her written orders enclosed in a leather pouch from her backpack. The seamen spent quite a bit of effort to read the contents, with one of them using his shirt as an umbrella, while the other checked it. They quickly realized that a royal was in the group and their face turned green.

「… A-Apologies for our insolence, Third Princess! We are honoured by your support and presence!」

The seamen saluted tensely and cautiously, then pointed to the gangway stiffly.

「Please head to the deck and let the sailors aboard guide you, the Admiral is await your presence in the war room.」

The five of them followed the instructions of the seaman waiting aboard the ship, and finally got out of the rain after going inside the ship from the deck. However, they were still drenched saved their undergarments.

「Ughh… We are completely wet. Let's dry ourselves off before meeting the Admiral…」

Haro muttered as she brush her damp hair, but the seaman leading them continued walking briskly, not giving them time to take out towels from their luggage. It was the same for the other four, and they could only give up on drying themselves.

They tried their best to avoid dripping water onto the ship, and observed the inside of the ship.

「… I didn't have time to see the exterior clearly, but this is a surprisingly big ship. There seemed to be a few more decks below, which was probably the lodging area? There are probably hundreds of sailors on board.」

「This is the flagship of the First Naval Fleet 『Yellow Dragon』, the maximum passenger capacity should be 1,040.」

Matthew answered Yatori's query, and Torway opened his eyes and stared at him.

「You know that very well, Ma-chan. So you are familiar with ships?」

「This… This is just common sense, you are the ones who didn't study enough.」

「Ughh, that's harsh. After all, the command system in the Army and Navy is very different, so it's easy to think of them as two separate organizations… But there are times when we will conduct operations together like this, so there is no excuse for neglecting to learn about them. We should follow Matthew's example.」

Yatori crossed her arms and gave her comment. It was rare for the pudgy youth to be praised, but his expression was complicated as he averted his gaze. Princess Chamille who was confounded by his attitude was about to speak when the seaman leading them stopped before the room at the very end of the corridor.

「This is the war room, please enter.」

The five of them was conscious about their drenched uniforms, but they still went in– the scene waiting for them in the room made everyone aside from Yatori react awkwardly.

「Welcome! Welcome to my ship, young heroes! I'm very glad to meet you all!」

A clear and charming voice greeted the five of them. The owner of the voice was at the deepest end of the room to welcome them along with two subordinates, and would leave a deep impression on anyone.

First, the high nose bridge and wavy hair that was reddish yellow, bright lipsticks and purple mascara… these were the features of a beautiful lady with thick makeup. However, the problem lies below– which was a muscular body in a naval uniform, standing at a height that was definitely more than 6 feet.

「… Ara～? What's the matter, you got caught in the rain? How~ terrible! You are completely drenched! Danmier, Pommy, dry them up quickly!」

On this person's orders– who's gender remain ambiguous– the male and female subordinates standing by walked towards Yatori's group. They then took out handkerchiefs to wipe the faces and hair of the five of them who were a little embarrassed.



「Ah～ the handkerchiefs won't work. Apologies, I will get some people to send towels over.」

The man named Danmier said as he brushed Haro's hair. He was a youth with short hair and a gentle attitude, which leaves a good impression.

「Can you lift your head slightly higher? I need to wipe your neck too…」

「Ah… Yes…」

The woman named Pommy helped Matthew wiped away the droplets on his neck. She had an unsightly scar on her right cheek, but her smile was surprisingly gentle. Being so close to a girl he just met made the slightly plump youth blush.

「We are honoured by your kind hospitality, Admiral Erynphin Jurgus.」

Yatori saluted in response to this kind treatment. The other four twisted their faces when they heard that, thinking: 「As expected, it is him.」

「Please don't mention it～! And please dispense with the formalities in the upcoming journey, you may ask me for anything. You are my important guests, so I will do my best to accommodate your needs!」

Yatori had reservations about the term 「guests」, but she didn't sound it out, and just offer her thanks with her gaze. The commander-in-chief of the Katjvarna Navy and the captain of the flagship 「Yellow Dragon」, Admiral Jurgus showed a toothy and cheerful smile to the young soldiers.

「I admire young people! Youth is beauty, power and the courage to strive forth and not turn back! At times, it is accompanied by foolishness, but you are not the average people, but the heroes of the war in the northern territories! So you are more beautiful than anyone else, stronger than all others, and bravest of them all! And become a flawless being in the name of your title as Imperial Knights!」

They felt a little hesitant to acknowledge such compliments, but the five of them accepted it with a nod for now. Admiral Jurgus then turned towards Princess Chamille.

「– Nice to meet you, Third Princess. I am deeply honoured by your visit to my humble vessel. It's a cramped place that stinks of fish, so I hope you can bear with this less than appropriate lodgings.」

「No, this is a great and majestic ship. I will be in your care, Admiral.」

The Princess responded with a salute. After learning from many failures, she had finally settled down on the tone she would use with her superiors. Acting like a mere Lieutenant would make others feel troubled, so she would intentionally put on some airs of a royal to put them at ease. After greeting his guest of honour, Admiral Jurgus' gaze fell on the other four.

「It seems we are short of one person?」

「Apologies for the late report, First Lieutenant Ikuta Solork is scheduled to join us at the next port.」

「Is that so? Very well then, let me introduce you to my subordinates.」

Admiral Jurgus didn't pursue the matter of Ikuta being absent, and went into the next topic without missing a beat.

「That gentle type man who give the impression of being a hypocrite is Naval Commander Danmier Kanron. He is basically my deputy, and the Chief Navigator of the Yellow Dragon. Let me make this clear first, he is not my boy toy or servent. If there is any opening, we will kick each other into the sea.」

「I'm Danmier Kanron, pleased to meet all of you. Our boss might look like a transvestite weirdo at first glance, if you get to know him, you will understand that he is really just a transvestite weirdo. So just think of this as being unlucky to have encountered a storm, and give it up.」

「Watch it, Danmier, I will tear your skin off!」

Sacarcism and angry shouts rang out. So he really is a transvestite… Matthew got a headache listening to this conversation.

「Hmmo… and this girl is First Grade Lieutenant Polminue Jurgus.[3] You can probably tell from her name that she is my niece. She isn't serving aboard this ship, and is the First Lieutenant of another mid sized vessel. Her rank is similar to your group, and she is just a little older. Please get along with her.」

「I have already heard of your heroic exploits, please take care of me!」

First Grade Lieutenant Polminue shook hands with everyone in Matthew's group after saying that. After learning she was 「Admiral Jurgus' niece」, they took a closer look at her, and their reddish blonde hair seemed to indicate their familial ties. However, they didn't resemble each other in all other aspects at all.

「I wanted to split you into two equal groups between this ship and Pommy's ship. And of course, the Princess must stay on this ship, but you can divide the other members however you wish. It's a bit rude, but you have to decide for your colleague who isn't here too.」

After being given an unexpected choice, the five of them looked at each other. While the young ones were troubling over this, Admiral Jurgus added with a smile:

「Personally, I will be happier if the cute boys stay behind… Fufufu.
」

「I want to board the mid size ship!」 「I… I want to go there too!」

Matthew and Torway who felt a chill down their spine raised their hands, and Admiral Jurgus had an obviously disappointed face.

「Ara, both of you are leaving? What a pity, I had my eyes on both of you…」

「I want to stay on the flagship with Her Highness. What about you, Haro?」

「Hmm～ I'm fine with either side…」

It was hard for Haro to decide– But since Yatori was staying on the flagship, then their other leader Ikuta should join the other side. She said after making up her mind:

「… I will stay on the flagship then, but we will be splitting into a boys and girls group.」

「I-It's fine to divide ourselves like this from time to time, right? By the way, Admiral Sir, what about our subordinates?」

「Well… I was planning to let your men split themselves between several vessels. Unfortunately, Pommy's side don't have much vacancy left, and can take in just 8 people.」

Admiral said half-heartedly. Matthew and Torway looked at each other blankly.

「… We can only bring over 8 people. What should we do, Torway?」

「How about selecting the four best snipers from each of our units? Luminous troops aren't very effective in a naval battle, so I think Ik-kun will agree with us.」

Torway brought a company of two hundred Air Shooters with him, which included the platoon commanded by Matthew. Due to their ranks as First Lieutenant and Second Lieutenant, Torway was Matthew's reporting officer.

「I'm fine with that… But it's better to bring eight of your snipers there, right?」

「That really depends. For example, when boarding an enemy ship or defending against enemy boarders, I think your group will fare better since you are more proficient with close distance combat… Furthermore, we are on away ground. Ik-kun is an exception, but we will feel more at ease with men that will follow our orders with us.」

Without any subordinates, they would be commanders with an empty title. Since they would be staying on a military vessel they weren't used to, it would be better to avoid such an awkward situation– Matthew could tell what Torway was implying, and nodded.

「Looks like it is decided? Alright then, we will lead you to your quarters in a short moment. After you have dry yourselves off.」

After Admiral Jurgus said that, seamen holding a large stack of towels entered the room.

After parting ways with the girl's group, Matthew and Torway left the flagship. They selected eight men from their unit that was standing by, and followed First Grade Lieutenant Polminue and walked through the harbour. The rain had completely stopped while they were talking to Admiral Jurgus, and glimpses of the beautiful sky could be seen through gaps in the clouds.

「Ahh… Ermm, is it fine to address you as Lieutenant Jurgus…? Or should I add in Mdm? By the way, how does the command structure works in this situation?」

「Ms. Jurgus is a First Grade Lieutenant, so we are all junior officers.[4] Since we will be commanding different units under a Ship Captain, it is hard to say who has the higher rank…」

After checking with each other, they couldn't find the answer. At this moment, Lieutenant Jurgus turned back and smiled at them:

「Please, no need to call me Mdm. It will just be a short time, but we are still comrades sailing in the same ship.」

Seeing her cute smile that was like a flower in full bloom, Matthew's mood improved. He let down his guard, and started talking a lot without realizing it.

「It's great to hear you say that. I actually feel quite uneasy. I experienced a shipwreck when I was on the way to take the Officer Cadet Military Academy screening exam, and aside from that, I heard all kinds of scary rumours about the Katjvarna Navy. Like being 『a

military organization that isn't really one』,『A violent group extrajudicial powers』 and others… But rumours are just rumours after all, seeing is believing.」

While Matthew was still talking by himself with his arms crosses, they had reached their destination. They stood behind Lieutenant Jurgus who had stopped, and looked up at the ship before them.

The ship floating steadily on the ocean was much smaller than the 「Yellow Dragon」 they boarded earlier, but it was still a grand three mast Cruiser. The sails were rolled up as the ship was docked, but it was clear from the direction of the booms that one was a Square rig, and two were Fore-and-aft rigs.[5]

「Please board the ship, the crew has been waiting for you.」

Lieutenant Jurgus walked up the gangway briskly with Matthew and Torway behind her. However, when they stepped onto the deck in a light mood and their guard down–

「「「「「「「「Welcome back, Boss Jurgus!」」」」」」」」

Greeted by the coarse voices of a group of men almost made them fall backwards. The subordinates behind them did so too.

A large group of sailors with their shirt unbuttoned stood in formation on the deck, with their tanned skin, thick arms and buffed chest uncovered. Some of them even had tattoos. Their dressing and crude tone could only be described as 「delinquent-like」.

「Ahh～ I'm back, thanks for the reception.」

Matthew and Torway couldn't tell who was saying that momentarily. But after thinking about it calmly, there was only one answer. The girl who was smiling like a flower earlier immediately took off her

shirt and toss it aside after being welcomed by the seamen, showing her skin that was as tanned as the sailors.

「As you can see, these are landlubbers who don't really know the sea. Take good 『care』 of them before they get used to things around here, got it?」

「「「「「「「「Yes, Boss Jurgus!」」」」」」」」

Their tones were crude, but their words were uniforms. Matthew had an ominous feeling and asked timidly:

「E-Erm… Lieutenant Jurgus…? No, Mdm Lieutenant?… Uwah!」

With a 'shwing', a sharp blade appeared before Matthew who was asking a question. Lieutenant Jurgus who had a thick saber in her hand turned and pointed its tip at Matthew.

「I told you not to call me 『Mdm』, right? Were you even listening, Fatty!?」

The nasty voice hit Matthew hard, and he felt like crying, wondering where the gentle girl that was before him earlier had gone. She then continued her relentless assault.

「If you want to, you can call me Boss Jurgus! Remember that too, lanky guy from the Remeon house!」

「Huh… Yes!」

Torway showed his weakness against opponents with unreasonable and strong attitudes. Lieutenant Jurgus smiled arrogantly at the two of them who had been overwhelmed by her mentally, then stood with swagger and her arms crossed before them with her buffed subordinates behind her.

「Let me make this clear first, you are the ones who picked the wrong option between heaven or hell. Unlike my uncle's ship, who don't demand the crew to be gentle and well mannered… Never mind, this isn't a surprise at all, the rumours that fatty heard about is true.」

She rest her sabre on her shoulder and laughed smuggly. Matthew and Torway immediately understood that instead of a woman from the navy, her demeanor was closer to that of a pirate. The scar on her face that they couldn't bear to see when they first met was just a part of her true image.

「Anyway, welcome to the 13th Cruiser of the Katjvarna Pirate Navy, the 『Tyrannosaur』. I'm happy to receive you, heroes of the dry land– alright, enough with your stiff faces, even if you want to run, you have already boarded a pirate ship.」

Seeing that everyone has boarded, the seamen immediately retrieve the gangway behind Matthew and Torway. The moment they realized that their connection to dry land has been cut off, the group felt they were being locked into a cage.

「S-Sir…」

Even when they heard their subordinates called out to them in a feeble voice, the two were at a lost for words.

At the same time, in a different place. On board of the flagship of the First Fleet, the 「Yellow Dragon」, Yatori and Princess Chamille who had completed all their paperwork toured the inside of the ship.

「Ah– T-The Third Princess! My apologies, but I need to walk past you!」

「This is a dirty place, but please relax and have a good rest.」

The seamen who were bustling around with chores all stop and salute when they saw the duo. They felt sorry for troubling the busy seamen, but the two of them insisted on grasping the structure of the ship as quickly as possible.

「… We can't tell Admiral Jurgus, that we have been worried about the ship sinking from the moment we boarded the ship.」

「But we still need to be prepared for any emergencies. After all, we have already experienced a military vessel sinking.」

The two of them reminiscenced a ferry they took on their way to the Officer Cadet Military Academy screening exam sinking in a storm.[6] They stuck as close to the walls of the passageway as possible as they moved around. The four decked ship was as big as a small hotel, and the group were assigned to cabins in the second deck. Just exploring this deck took quite a bit of time.

「We can visit the third deck and below another time. That is the quarters of the soldiers, so we won't have much chance to visit. Besides, the duties of tending to our subordinates had been delegated to Haro.」

「That's true. Alright then, let's move to the deck above without troubling others too much.」

The two of them nodded at each other, and went up the stairs. The moment they reached the upper deck, a seabreeze that taste of salt blew their long hair. The waterfall-like rain had completely stopped, and the clouds drifted to the west to reveal the brilliant sun.

「We will be setting sail soon! Open the sails on the rear mast!」

Many seamen were working under the relentless sun. Some climbed to dizzying heights on rope ladders to open the sails; others were

moving their hands quickly to untie the mooring lines from the pier. As expected of a crew from the flagship, it was clear to even amateurs that their movements were sharp and swift.

Looking at this 「Yellow Dragon」 in clear weather made it look more majestic in the harbour. Just being over a hundred meters long was already awe inspiring, and the ship's body wasn't narrow, but solidly built with great carlings to support the well balanced structure.[7] It had three masts just like the other ships, but more sails than the others. Just the main mast alone has 6 sails.

「Isn't this an impressive ship? Our side is claiming that this is the largest ship in the world.」

To avoid disturbing the operation on the ship, Yatori and the Princess stood at the aft deck which overlooks the entire vessel. At this moment, a young man suddenly approached them. It was Admiral Jurgus' deputy who they had met in the war room, Commander Danmier Kanron.

「Yes, I think this ship is majestic too, and don't think there are bigger ships in another country.」

「Indeed… But for ships, bigger doesn't always mean better. A large ship will naturally be slower, so this ship is mainly used to ferry a large number of personnel and resources. Isn't this wrong for a military vessel…? What do you think?」

Even though simple pleasantries would be fine, Commander Kanron tossed out a tough question. The Princess was troubled, while Yatori smiled awkwardly– they already noticed during his interaction with Admiral Jurgus, this young man was rather pessimistic and sarcastic, contrary to how he looks.

「… In a fleet, the flagship is the central command centre and a mobile command post. In that sense, the mission of the flagship is naturally not involved in direct battles. The battle will be over if the flagship falls, so the priority isn't on offensive abilities, but defensive prowess. This ship have large numbers of melee combatants that befit its size, so it is not a stretch to call it an excellent flagship..」

Yatori shared her views fearlessly, and Commander Kanron slapped his forehead:

「That's correct. As expected of Ms Igsem, you are as impeccable as the legends say.」

「No, not at all. I just realized how little I know about ships.」

Seeing Yatori lower her head humbly, Commander Kanron quickly reached out his hands to stop her:

「Wait, this is a surprise… No need to be so formal, please be more at ease. After all, Admiral Jurgus did tell me to show you our hospitality.」

「Is that so? Sorry for being so sudden, but there is something I would like to ask.」

「You are insisting on being so formal huh… Alright then, what would you like to know?」

「During our time on board this ship, is there anything we need to do?」

It was a very direct question. The young man smiled wryly and hesitated for a moment. A short moment later, he looked as if he had given up, and leaned on the railings of the deck:

「… Frankly speaking, nothing at all. Please rest as much as possible.」

「I heard that this trip will last more than twenty days, it will be very boring if there isn't any work for the entire journey.」

「We don't want to just let you idle either. But the matter of how to treat your group is a complicated matter for us too…」

The young man scratched his cheek and had a face that implied that he was not at liberty to speak freely. Princess Chamille who had been quiet all this while spoke:

「Because the parliament wanted to glorify this campaign, you had been forced to accept this 'complimentary gift'… That's probably how it is.」

「P-Please don't say that! I swear that I'm very grateful for your support. Even though we are called the Katjvarna Pirate Navy, we are still a part of the military. Just the presence of the Princess on the flagship is enough to raise the morale of the crew by several folds.」

「I will feel at ease if that is true… But even so, the truth remains that you can't entrust any duties to us, correct?」

When he heard the Princess' question, Commander Kanron showed a straight face and fell into deep thought with his arms crossed.

「… Do you understand the gist of the campaign? In order to retake the Hioredo mine hills in the former eastern territories, the army will attack via land, while our unit will transport supplies by sea.」

The two of them nodded. Their supervising officer Major Senpa Sazarf and his battalion had also joined this army traveling by land. As the ore mine was landlocked, the core of the invasion forces were the army.

「If we continue along this sea route, we will enter the sea under the jurisdiction of Kioka, so there is a good chance of a sea battle happening there. Originally, I was hoping that you can assist us as marines when that happens, but…」 [8]

Sailors operating the ship when not in combat were called 「seamen」,while crew members serving purely as combatants on the ship were called 「marines」. The Knight Corps and the unit under them should rightfully be treated as so–

「… But you are all army soldiers, and the most effective way of deploying your unit will be to roster you under the army… Since you had been sent to the Navy which is a different department, we can interpret the intent of the higher-ups to be– 『Safety first, don't let the Third Princess and the heroes get hurt』.」

Yatori sighed. 「Reinforcement that are carefully hidden in the rear」 might sound amusing, but it was an ironic situation that occurs quite frequently.

「Undocking preparations are complete! Releasing mooring lines!」 [9]

A clear voice announcing the launching of the ship rang out across the deck. A floating sensation came and past in a flash, giving Yatori and the Princess the feeling that the ship had really left the dock.

「… We have set sail huh. Sorry for cutting our conversation short, but I have to go.」

Commander Kanron apologized to the two of them, then saluted with his back straight. The duo mimicked his actions, and Kanron turned around with a smile. He then jogged across the deck and disappeared down the stairs leading into the inside of the ship.

「… I already expected it, but they really don't see us as comrades on equal grounds. But he didn't overly mince his words or fawn over us during his explanation. This is good luck for us.」

「The truth is, we really are amateurs. Leaving everything to the experts is an acceptable option too… But, you don't plan to do that, right?」

「Yes… During our time in the northern territories, we have all experienced the feeling of 『being trapped in a situation that is gradually deteriorating but lacking the authority to improve things』, and how frustrating and vexing that is. I have great confidence in our Navy, and I won't compare Admiral Jurgus to Lieutenant General Tamshiikushik Safida– However, no one can tell what will happen on the battlefield.」

Even if it was just one percent, Yatori would not hesitate to cross the line of a well behaved guest to increase their survivability. Her crimson eyes looked up at the mast erected before her with unwavering determination.

The Princess felt Yatori was very dependable like this, but there was gloom in her face.

「… But … an implied message huh…」

「…? Are you referring to what Commander Kanron said just now?」

「Yes. 『Safety first, don't let the Third Princess and the heroes get hurt』 – that seems to be how he interpret the intentions of the higher-ups for sending us into the Navy. This was only natural for anyone who think of themselves as warriors of the sea. However… From the way I see it, that might not be the truth.」

「… You are saying that this arrangement wasn't made to ensure our safety?」

「There are some matters that felt troubling. Compared to the land route where battles might break out, the sea route might seem safer… But that is only true for the units on the very frontline. The land route will be very safe if we are assigned to the supply unit in the rear. From the perspective of which route is easier to escape from danger, the land route would make more sense.」

「If there really is an ulterior motive aside from safety concerns… Your Highness, that means…」

「At this point in time, I still can't tell. Maybe they just want to improve Navy's morale… But the『higher-ups』 mentioned earlier isn't referring to just the military upper management. The idea of sending us in as reinforcements to act as gold foiling for the campaign– probably came from the cabinet worried about the rising anti-war sentiments within the country.」

That's a demonic realm… The Princess muttered with disgust. The schemes of the corrupted nobles lurking within the palace– the Princess might be smart, but she through their motives was still beyond her capabilities.

Seeing the Princess' thoughts falling into a deadend, Yatori said:

「No matter what, our priority is to strengthen our foundations. We might be amateurs in sailing, but we have experience in fighting Kioka units in the previous war, which definitely includes intel that the Navy don't know about. I want to use this to ensure we have a say in things.」

Yatori said as she shifted her gaze from the deck to the sea. Looking out from the starboard side of the 「Yellow Dragon」, she could see

that the entire fleet had started moving. Amongst the mid sized ships that had left port earlier than the flagsheet was the 「Tyrannosaur」 where Matthew and Torway were on.

「... Maybe Admiral Jurgus' niece can be an opening to breakthrough this situation, but asking Matthew and Torway to do so would be too harsh of a demand though.」

「Hey! Stop dragging your feet, fatty! Get a move on! You slow moron! Useless bum!」

Lieutenant Jurgus' angry roar came from far below. Matthew grabbed on to the boom of the mast for dear life, and couldn't even spare the effort to feel angry.

「D-Don't ask for the impossible! We have no experience working on a ship, we can't go any faster!」

Matthew cried in agony, and laughter rang out below. He had climbed up the foremast on a rope ladder, and was now about twelve meters above sea level. He was standing on the boom that was protruding horizontally out, with no stable foothold, and only with a thin and flimsy rope for him to walk on. Of course Matthew would feel afraid.

「Beanpole, you are just as slow! If you want to worry about your comrade, you need to take care of yourself first!」

Torway who was also ordered to scale the main mast had an easier time than Matthew as his limbs were longer. However, he still broke out in cold sweat as he walked along the rope. The height itself was already scary enough,and there was also cross wind that would blow without any warning.

As for why did the two of them embark on such a dangerous endeavour, there wasn't any deep meaning behind it. They were just asked to retrieve the ropes tied to the furthest ends of the boom, so the crew could laugh at how miserable they were. In short, it was abuse done in the name of work on a ship.

「– Ara ara, your movements sure are slow! Even a snail is faster than the both of you! Don't you feel any shame!?」

After spending almost 30 minutes to retrieve the ropes, the two of them returned to the deck after experiencing much hardship, and was lectured by Lieutenant Jurgus. Matthew's patience finally reached its limit. He forcefully regulated his hurried breathing, and stood up forcefully on the deck.

「S-Show some restraint! Why do reinforcements like us need to work like seamen!? You are not short on manpower, so don't make us perform work outside of our expertise!」

「... Huh? Huh, don't you understand your own position yet, fatty?」

Lieutenant Jurgus said nonchalantly and swung the saber on her shoulder hard. After the tip of the blade was pointed at Matthew's nose, she continued:

「First of all, we are not grateful of reinforcements from the land, you are just a burden and an eyesore. And there aren't any marines on this ship, so everyone will have to fight when things goes south, so everyone will have to work too. This is the nature of things, we don't have the luxury to let anyone laze around!」

「... I admit that this is a reasonable policy, and we are sorry that we are leeching off you. We will gladly help in anyway way we can– however!」

Matthew pointed behind him at this point. His four subordinates who carried out such harsh training while feeling seasick were all lying there with their faces green.

「What are you trying to do by pushing them so far on the first day!? I can accept slightly harsher training for recruits, but this is a different matter. There might be a battle in just a few weeks! Instead of training us into half-competent sailors, we should think about how to better integrate us into your unit!」

「Hmmp! For a slow fatty, but you sure are a cunning linguist.」

「… That's right, that face of yours. What pissed me off is your attitude. You don't plan to train us properly right from the start, and just want to torment us while using training as an excuse!」

After the raging Matthew criticized her quietly, Lieutenant Jurgus grunted.

「Hmmp, half of that is correct. I have never held any expectations from you, because it's impossible for landlubbers to fight normally in the sea. So we don't need to work together, since you lot will just cower in a corner and shiver when the fighting starts.」

「What the hell are did you say…!」

Matthew was quivering in rage, and Torway stepped forward on his behalf.

「Lieutenant Jurgus, please stop this… I know very well how lowly you think of us, but seeing my comrade being humiliated is still very unpleasant. Can you understand that? This sort of things is really upsetting.」

A pair of strong willed jade eyes glared back at her. The aura about Torway probably intimidated Lieutenant Jurgus, and she turned around after clicking her tongue.

「Hmmp! Let's see how long you can keep up your spirits– Hey, the lot of you! Play time's over, get back to work!」

「「「「「「「Yes, Boss Jurgus!」」」」」」」

The crew who received their orders dispersed, leaving Matthew at a corner of the deck stamping the floor in anger.

After that, the abuse made under the guise of training continued. Matthew's group would be called up to the deck to perform meaningless and dangerous work, or to scrub the deck until they got exhausted. By using the authority granted to her by the Ship Captain, Lieutenant Jurgus was ruthless and vicious in her torment.

And of course, the grudge of the party being persecuted was also accumulating… And something finally happened on the fourth night after setting sail. Similar to the past several days, the two of them were ordered to mend the old and tattered sail by the Naval Lieutenant for two hours, before finally heading to the Officer's Mess with an empty stomach. The straw that broke the camel's back happened here.

「That's really slow. Here are your dinner.」

「… What?」

Matthew and Torway stared at 「that thing」 on the table blankly. On the two plates were something pinkish and appeared to be fish fillets. And that was it. No soup or jerky, not even bread. Torway leaned closer to the plate and furrowed his brows.

「It looks uncooked… Is it raw?」

「That's right, fresh vegetables are valuable commodities in the sea. You have to eat raw fish to avoid scurvy.[10] Don't you know that?」

The Naval Lieutenant smiled maliciously as she put her elbow on the table and rested her chin on her hand. Matthew was enraged and gritted his teeth:

「... I did heard about that. We left port just four days ago, I don't think our supplies are running that low. I don't want to press that point, the important thing is, is this all the food for us?」

「Do you think there is? As you can see, this is all of it.」

「How can that be enough!? And you also have bread and vegetables, correct!? Stop messing around and bring us a proper meal!」

The furious Matthew slammed the table with both hands. Lieutenant Jurgus didn't back down either, grabbing the hilt of her saber and knocking it heavily onto the table.

「Don't get cocky now, you useless bum! Be grateful that you get any food at all!」

「You are calling this rotting fish food? It will upset my stomach, so it's better not to eat it!」

「Shut up! Don't eat it if you want to complain!」

「... Is that so! You don't need to tell me, I will do just that!」

Matthew said with disdain, kicked open the door and left the Officer's Mess. Torway followed without any hesitation, leaving the untouched plates on the table.

Part 2

「– Damn it!」

Matthew who was still furious charged up to the deck, and stamped his feet and kicked the base of the main mast. Torway who followed soothed him in a calm tone.

「Ma-chan, the ship is innocent.」

「Yes, that's true! But we didn't do anything wrong that deserved punishment of eating fish that is on the verge of rotting too!」

As he was yelling, his stomach rumbled loudly. Matthew immediately turned deflated, and he laid down in frustration. Torway didn't say anything under the dark sky that was gradually engulfing the ocean, and simply sat down beside his friend.

「… Hey, why does that woman hate us so much?」

「Hmm～ just having a member of the army boarding the same ship as her was enough to piss her off…」

「If it's such a trivial reason, will she kept harassing and abusing us? Seeing how much work needs to be done on the ship, they aren't that free either. Is the dissatisfaction amongst the crew so bad that they had to resort seeking entertainment through bullying… If that is so, then the ship is in a bad spot right from the start.」

Matthew knew what he was saying wasn't the correct answer. He didn't want to admit it, but the crew of the 「Tyrannosaur」 were very united under Lieutenant Jurgus. They were a group that didn't need to vent their stress by sacrificing the well being of outsiders.

「Then, is that woman just a sadist…? If that is true, then we are done for, damn it!」

Matthew's punch landed weakly on the deck. Torway didn't know what to say to his depressed friend. After failing to find a solution, he decided to change the topic to prep themselves up.

「Hey Ma-chan, can I ask something?」

「What?」

「It's embarrassing to say, but I don't understand the structure of a sail ship at all. This might sound stupid… But the wind blowing at the ship should be horizontal to our bearing right? How are we still able to move forward?」

Torwaygazed out into the dark sea beyond the railing as he tilted his head confusedly. After a while Matthew who was stil laying sprawled on the deck said:

「… This is an important part when explaining the functionality of the sails. Roughly speaking, the water resistance against the keel will keep the ship from losing its bearing, and the sails will only draw out the force moving forward from the wind blowing at an angle… something like that.」

「Uggh～ That's difficult to understand. It's easy to imagine being pushed from behind by the wind…」

「Yes, it is difficult. The sail ship in the past can only move forward with a tailwind, so during that era, they could only set sail when the wind was in their favour. That was why the navigating technique of adjusting the sails to travel against the wind was a revolutionary discovery for seafarers–」

「Oh～ you are really knowledgeable for a land dweller, impressive.
」

At this moment, a hoarse voice interrupted them. Matthew propped himself up in surprise, and saw an elderly man with a snow white beard had appeared before them with a walking stick in hand.

「However, you won't understand seafaring if you don't try it yourself… This might sound condescending, but this logic will apply in any other fields.」

「… Grandpa, who might you be?」

「Hmm? Me? I'm just the captain of this ship.」

Despite what he said, Matthew and Torway couldn't take these words at face value… His wrinkled pants that had been rolled up to his knees looked somewhat like a navy uniform, but they couldn't find any rank insignia on the sleeveless shirt hanging on his skinny torso.

For a military vessel of this size, the Ship Captain should be a high ranking sailor equivalent to an army field grade officer.[11] However, they couldn't feel the authority befitting such a rank from the sloppily dressed old man before them. On the other hand, it was unlikely that he would lie under such circumstances, so Matthew and Torway stood up and saluted with some doubts in their mind.

「P-Pardon me, Sir Captain. I'm Second Lieutenant, Matthew Tetzirich from the army.」

「Also from the Army, First Lieutenant Torway Remeon reporting. Erm… my apologies, but may I have your name, Sir Captain…」

「I'm Naval Commander Ragieshī Kutsuchi. Just call me Captain. Pommy ask others to call her Boss Jurgus too right? This ship isn't that calculative about such matters.」

「Sorry for greeting you so late. Lieutenant Jurgus didn't mention anything, and we didn't meet you until today, so we thought you would only be boarding at the next harbour...」

Seeing the two of them lower their heads in a panic, Naval Commander Kutsuchi simply shook his head with a smile.

「Don't worry about it. As you can see, I'm actually half retired. I might still retain my title as captain, but I had handed the de facto command to Pommy. I'm no different from a decoration now.」

「We are aware of that after these few days... But compared to Sir Captain, Lieutenant Jurgus seemed very young. Isn't it too early to hand the reins over to her now?」

「Age isn't a problem. The navy is a meritocracy, and demands the ability to handle adverse situations..」

「... Is she really that good? I can't believe it. She had no intentions of working with us seriously just because she thinks land dwellers are an eyesore.」

Matthew couldn't help stating what he really felt, and the old man laughed.

「Well... She is outstanding in terms of seafaring abilities. There are probably just five people in the entire navy who are better in navigating a mid sized vessel than her.」

The slightly pudgy youth looked unhappy when he heard the person he detest being held in such high regard. Naval Commander Kutsuchi who was amused by this reaction continued:

「However, I have my reservation on whether she qualifies in other aspects. For example, the way she interacts with you two brings out these worrying factors.」

「… I'm curious about this part. Why does she hate us so much? It might be unpleasant for outsiders to board her ship, but I don't think that is the entire story.」

「… Hmm, youngest son of house Remeon, you seem to be a talented student. I can sense kindness from your demeanour, that is wonderful.」

「Huh…?」

「However, it's hard for you to understand how Pommy feels with such wholesome thinking– so that's where you come in, boy from house Tetzirich.」

「Me…? What's this all about?」

「You just need to think from a different perspective. Alright, you are now Pommy, a new naval officer that had been trained by the Katjvarna navy. You are also a member of house Jurgus, one of 『The Three Loyal House』, a girl of noble bloodline. You are conscious of your standings and family history, and on top of that, you are young and your pride knows no bounds— however, you have a weak point. You have never been through live combat.」

The elderly man explained smoothly, and Matthew was completely captivated.

「Since you have never been on a battlefield, you won't have the chance to achieve any war merits. Hence, no matter how capable you might be, you won't be hailed as a hero. This is only natural but– just went you were feeling anxious about this situation, a small

incident happened. Without any warning to brace yourself mentally, a group younger than you with the titles of Imperial Knights and revered as heroes appeared before you. How would you feel if that happens?」

At this point, the youth looked at Naval Commander Kutsuchi with an enlightened attitude.

.

「… Jealousy, anxious, competitiveness… This sort of emotions? Is that why she is so hostile?」

「So you reached that conclusion easily. Yes, that's how it is. Pommy is jealous of you, that's why she despise you to the point of not even wanting to work together with you.」

The Naval Commander sighed as he spoke, and Matthew scratched his head with his right hand.

「Jealousy…? A member of house Jurgus is jealous of me…? How is that possible…」

「You finally realized that you are now on the side that is being envied? But, there is nothing to be embarrassed about. The fact that you only realized this fact now is proof that your eyes are set on higher heights– you are not satisfied with how things are right now, and has set your sights on an incredibly lofty goal, correct?」

Matthew was rendered speechless by the such an astute observation, and the old man laughed cheerfully in a croaking voice.

「Anyway, that's how things stands. So what will you do? If what I said left you completely disappointed about Pommy, I will use my authority to send you back to the flagship. You will be able to enjoy the privileges accorded to esteemed guests there.」

When Torway was offered the chance to flee which he had been craving for, he turned to his friend on reflex. However, the mildly fat youth fell into deep thoughts with furrowed brows, and shook his head after a short moment:

「… I'm grateful for the offer, but I will have to turn you down. That will be no different from running away.」

「Ma-chan……」

「Go back to the flagship, Torway. You don't need to accommodate my stubborness.」

Torway immediately shook his head and rejected this kind offer. Matthew smiled wryly at this expected reaction. Because if their positions were reversed, he would have done the same.

「So you won't run? You two have some backbones.」

「I'm just pissed off about being on the receiving end with no avenue of retaliating. I'm not such a merciful guy.」

Matthew smiled boldly. Torway was relieved that his friend had gotten his spirit back, and started thinking with a hand on his chin.

「… But what should we do, specifically? It's no easy task to make Lieutenant Jurgus see us in a new light…」

「To be honest, I haven't thought of a plan yet– But there's hope too. Because the atmosphere in this ship will change drastically tomorrow.」

Matthew said with certainty. The other youth looked troubled as he didn't understand why he thought that way, and Matthew raised the corners of his lips maliciously.

「Haven't you been keeping count of the days? If we are going according to schedule, then this ship will reached the last resupply port tomorrow.」

「… Ahh!」

「That's right. The drawn out battle will end today. Let's prepare for the counteroffensive with our reinforcements, Torway.」

The next morning. Including the 「Tyrannosaur」, the Katjvarna First Fleet called at port 塔库 located in the southeast of the Empire just as Matthew predicted. The twelve military vessels standing by here would also join the fleet. After setting sail from this port, the Kioka sea would just be a short hop away.

「Okay! Stop slacking off! Load up the ship quickly!」

Lieutenant Jurgus who was standing on deck directed the seamen transporting the goods. And of course Matthew's group was amongst them, carrying the seemingly never ending crates and barrels. They started at 10 in the morning, but there was no sign of stopping even when noon passes.

「… Too slow! What is he doing…!」

Matthew who was drenched in sweat carried a barrel as he kept grumbled in a way no different from cursing. Even though the ship had just reached the port, the key person he had been waiting for still wasn't here. And with the excuse of carrying cargo, the Naval Lieutenant started getting cocky.

「Hey, fatty and beanpole! Why are you two so slow!? We can't finish by nightfall if you keep this up!」

「… Ughh! In that case, come down and help too! Being a naval officer sure is an easy job huh, just stand around and yell at others all day!」

「Huh～? Is that a pig snorting? I can't understand that at all!」

「Damn it…!」

The loading of the goods will being yelled at continued for three more hours, and it was almost evening. Most of the cargo has been loaded up, but the reinforcement they were waiting for was still not here.

「Ughh…!」

Matthew and Torway worked together to carry the last barrel that was incredibly heavy up onto the deck. As the two of them leaned against the railing to catch their breath after performing such harsh labor, the Naval Lieutenant issued an harsh order

「Okay! The resupply is finally finished! You lot, pull up the gangway!」

「… Ughh! W-Wait–」「「「「「「「「Yes! Boss Jurgus!」」」」」」」」

The seamen pull up the only path connecting the ship to the harbour after receiving their orders. They were so swift that Matthew and Torway could only stand at the side and stare blankly.

「Seems like the person you are waiting for didn't make it? Such a shame～」

Seeing that their hopes had been dashed, Lieutenant Jurgus sneered. The two of them were too shocked to speak.

「How can that be… Are you serious… He didn't come…」

The slightly pudgey youth couldn't even muster the strength to stand, and fell on his knees. But before their spirits were completely crushed, the barrel they just carried up started shaking behind them.

「– No, I'm already here.」

「……!」

「The star of the show will always make his appearance late. Here I come~! Someone called for me!? Dang dang dang!」

The lid on the barrel flew off with that familiar voice. Matthew and Torway turned around in surprise, and saw their sorely missed raven hair friend whose lower body was still inside the barrel.

「Ik…Ik-kun!」 「Ikuta!」

Light returned to their solemn faces. Ikuta who was satisfied that his sneak attack work stepped out of the barrel and puffed his chest out arrogantly.

「My friend Matthew and ikeman, it's been a while. I'm really touched by your welcome, hiding inside the barrel and enduring the moldy smell is worth it after all.」

「I… I was wondering why that barrel was so heavy, so it's because you…! Just report here normally, damn it!」

「We have been waiting for you, Ik-kun…! I thought we can't link up with you back then…!」

Their relief was evident in their voices. Ikuta noticed from their attitudes that something happened before he was here.

「It hasn't been long since we last met, and you two look really thin. What happened? Is the food portions in the navy really stingy?」

「No, we can’t even spare the effort to worry about that– uwah!」

While the three of them were talking, a sabre suddenly thrust in. Lieutenant Jurgus looked at the stowaway unhappily.

「Is this the third person? You are acting all cocky despite being late, what’s with that?」

She said angrily. From the gloom on Matthew and Torway’s faces, Ikuta could guess what happened on this ship.

「– My deep apologies! I’m Army First Lieutenant, Ikuta Solork. Please call me Ik-kun intimately.」

「Who will call you that, retard! Just barrel-boy will do for you!」

「Then please call me barrel-boy intimately. Fufu, she gave me a nickname already, that means I have a chance right, Matthew!?」

Despite Jurgus’ intimidating tone, Ikuta was still carefree and relaxed. This was the first time the Naval Lieutenant met an opponent like this. She didn’t know what to say, and Ikuta seized the initiative and asked:

「Well then, dear onee-san, can you tell me your name?」

「…I’m First Grade Lieutenant Polminue Jurgus, the one in charge of this ship. Let me make this clear, you will address me as Boss Jurgus.
」

「Okay, got it! By the way, how old are you, Pol-chan?」

In this instance, everyone except Ikuta froze. Lieutenant Jurgus’ face grew incredibly tense.

「… Hey, wait. What did you just say? What did you call me?」

「Hmm～ I think you are twenty… Am I right?」

「Listen properly! What did you just call me? Say it!」

The agitated Naval Lieutenant placed her blade on Ikuta's chest. Ikuta cast a casual glance at the saber that reflected the glaring light of the sun, and tilted his head puzzledly.

「It's dangerous to treat weapons like a toy, Pol-chan. You might cut your finger. Look, just like this.」

After saying that, the youth waved his left hand that was missing its pinkie. Lieutenant Jurgus was shocked by the sight of that, but tried to act calm as her subordinates were present too. She yelled fiercely:

「D-Does this look like a toy to you! What do you mean by Pol-chan!? If you look down on me, I will cut you into two!」

「Hufufu, it's futile if you are trying to scare me. Come on then.」

「Huh…!」

Ikuta wasn't fazed by the blade pointing at his chest, and tried to go near Lieutenant Jurgus. When the tip was about to pierce through his skin, Jurgus pulled her saber back in a panic.

「U-Uwah…!」

「Ahaha, there's no killing intent behind your blade at all, Pol-chan. And you have never cut anyone down before, right? If you have experience, you will break the skin a little without killing me at this juncture. But you couldn't do it, because you don't know how deep you can stab without killing me.」

Ikuta gently pushed away the blade with his palm and approached her. Sensing danger, the Naval Lieutenant backed away, but it was

too late. The next moment, Ikuta was already before her with his hands around her back.

「No matter what, let's have a hug to commemorate our first meeting. Hug––」

「Huh? Uwahhh!」

The shock of being hugged by a man for the first time made the descendent of Jurgus scream. Under the watchful eyes of the crew, she fell into a panic and kept hitting the back of her assailant with the hilt of her saber.

「That hurts, you are really pure. But thanks, I haven't had so much fun in a long time.」

After enjoying the soft sensation through the sleeveless vest, Ikuta let go of the Naval Lieutenant with a satisfied face. The youth then paused for a moment, then lift up the thing in his right hand towards the girl panting and glaring at him.

「By the way, Pol-chan, I just happened to pick something up…」

At a glance, it was a long strip of cloth with two half sphere attached to it. Lieutenant Jurgus realized what that was a short moment later, and reached for her breasts even though she thought it was impossible– when she didn't touch the material she was expecting to be there, her face turned green.

「W-When did you…!」

「Hmm～ whose is this? The clue is that the owner has a bust size of 78cm.」

「Don't say out the number! G-Give it back!」

She tried to take back her undergarment with a murderous face, but Ikuta dodged the Naval Lieutenant's hand while humming, then ran away. Lieutenant Jurgus was very unfortunate, and learned how horrible Ikuta was at running away after meeting him for the first time.

「The one who got tagged come this way~ where the clapping sound is～♪」

「Stay right there～～!」

He dashed from the front of the ship right to the end, then reached for the rope ladder at the rear mast and scaled it at a speed comparable to a cockroach. His climbing abilities had been honed by his frequent tree climbing, and even Lieutenant Jurgus couldn't match him.

「Hey～! Did anyone in the harbour drop this bra～!」

「Uwah～! Stop! Stop that ahhh!」

The bra held up high at the top of the mast fluttered in the sea breeze. In the face of this embarrassing sight, the crew just stood dumbfoundedly, while Matthew and Torway looked on with their hands on their stomachs.

「Fuhahaha…! L-Look, Torway! All our suffering got paid back with interest!」



「Ahahaha…! As… As expected of Ik-kun, he might not act as predicted, but he would never betray our expectations!」

A fight for the bra broke out at 15m above sea level. It was a rarely seen low level fight in recent years, which made the two of them forget all the frustrations they had for the past few days, and laughed so hard they couldn't even breath.

The tide had turned. With the arrival of their reinforcement, the defensive battle had ended– and the counteroffensive began.

The arrival of Ikuta changed the environment of the 「Tyrannosaur」 more drastically than Matthew expected. Lieutenant Jurgus had marked him as a target and set her sights completely on him.

「– Hmmp! You can't even tie a quick knot!? You landlubbers are really useless!」

The day after leaving port, the Naval Lieutenant summoned Matthew's group to the deck at noon, and started her abuse while using training as an excuse.

This time, she demanded the group to practice knot tying. Different knots would need to be tied depending on the situation, and differs from the knots used on land, so even Torway who had nimble hands had a tough time.

「It's impossible for us to know if we never learned it before! Can you clean an Air Shooter out of the blue!?」

「Shut up, fatty! Respect my authoritah! Just shut your mouth and move your hands as instructed!」

Unable to withstand her harsh lecture, Matthew gritted his teeth. At this moment, he noticed something from the corner of his eye.

Behind the Naval Lieutenant who was puffing her chest out arrogantly was a wobbly figure.

「… That's right, studies of rope usage is deep and had no boundaries. I feel bad about letting you teach us one sidedly, so let me reciprocate your kindness– take this!」

「– Uwah!」

The ropes criss crossed in a complicated manner on his target. The youth moved so swiftly that there were after images as he tied the knots in various places, and ended by pulling the ropes in his hands hard.

「「「「「「「「Woooahhh!」」」」」」」」

A miracle happened which made everyone watching open their eyes wide. The incredible thing was, the ropes on the Naval Lieutenant formed two perfectly matching hexagon around her breasts.

「Tortoise Shell Bondage… This is the art of rope tying. Using bondage to bring out the beauty of a woman's body!」 [12]

「Hyaaa!」

The tight ropes made her breasts even more prominent, and the embarrassed Lieutenant Jurgus squatted down. She wanted to cover her chest with her arms, but she couldn't move them as they had been tied up too. In the end, she looked even more erotic than when she was standing up.

「U-Untie me! Untie me right now!」

「Ara, don't say that, Pol-chan, this really suits you.」

「Are you kidding me…! You… you lot, what are you just standing around for! Hurry up and untie this!」

The immobile Naval Lieutenant seeked help from her subordinates. The seamen hurried over, but hesitated. Because no one knew how to undo the bindings.

「Boss, we have never seen this knot before…」

「Then cut it! Are those things on your waist just decorations!?」

There were no other way since she said so. Her subordinates were still hesitant, but they still drew out their blades and cut off the ropes one by one. After getting liberated from the ropes, the Naval Lieutenant glared at the youth who created all this trouble with furious eyes.

「You jerk, how dare you mock me by doing that…! Don't think you can get away scot free!」

The Naval Lieutenant signaled her subordinates to surround him with her gaze. However Matthew and Torway acted without hesitation when they realized what she was trying to do. They led their eight subordinates and stood before Ikuta.

「… Hey hey, I think it's unlikely, but are you trying to gang up on him with so many people?」

「Out of the way! You want me to beat you up too!?」

「If you want a fight, I will gladly give you one. But cool your head and look at yourself. Ikuta only teased you, and you are the only one who got humiliated. In other words, this is a personal matter between Ikuta and you, right? There are crews are not involved in this.」

「…… Ugh!」

「I heard that 『The humiliation one suffered has to be redeemed by your own strength』, which is the spirit expected of a warrior of the sea. Is the leader of this ship a useless bum who can't clean up after herself without relying on her subordinate's strength?」

With this ideal being used as a shield, the Naval Lieutenant could only grit her teeth in rage. If she gang up on Ikuta like this, that would be lowering herself to that of a fool, like what Matthew said. It might led to her losing her subordinate's trust.

「If you want to fight, then do it yourself. Capture Ikuta with your own strength, then you can kick him or beat him up however you want. If you follow this rule, we won't get in your way.」

Matthew said with a fearless smile. The defiance of someone she had looked down all this while made Lieutenant Jurgus' face turned beet red. Ikuta waved at her with a casual smile.

「Are you done chatting? Alright then, come, Pol-chan, try and catch me!」

This taunt was the final blow, and something snapped in Lieutenant Jurgus' mind. She drew her saber with quivering hands, and charged at the raven haired youth at full speed.

「Very well! I will cut you down ahhhh!」

What happened next was a repeat of yesterday. Even in an enclosed space like a ship, capturing Ikuta who was running with all his might was nigh impossible. They ran thirteen rounds clockwise around the deck, eight rounds counterclockwise, then climbed up and down the fore, aft, and main mast four times each. After chasing him around

the ship for so long, the exhausted Lieutenant Jurgus finally collapsed onto her knees.

「… Are… Are you a monster…?」

She looked up the mast as she panted, and found the youth waving with ease at her up there… She kept yelling after getting taunted; making unnecessary movements in her pursuit; while Ikuta moved efficiently with his calm understanding of the ship's structure— the combination of all these resulted in the gulf in the stamina they used.

「I win today. Let's play again tomorrow, Pol-chan.」

Ikuta climbed down the rope ladder to an adequate height before jumping down to the deck. He then walked pass the dumbfounded crew, and went below deck casually.

Maybe she was afraid that things would turn out the same if she took action while she was tired? Lieutenant Jurgus held back on her usual abuse on the next day, and focus on the ship's operation together with her crew… However, when she was heading towards the lowest rung of the foremast to retract the sail, the person she had been avoiding suddenly poked his head out.

「Fufufu, Pol-chan.」 「Uwahhh!」

She was so surprised that she let go of the sail, and her feet slip off the ropes she was standing on. *Oh no, I will fall*— as the Naval Lieutenant was thinking about that with her eyes shut tightly, ropes weaved into a complicated manner stopped her fall.

「… Huh…?」

「Alright! I caught one Pol-chan!」

Ikuta lifted his hands and cheered after the Naval Lieutenant fell into the trap hanging below the mast. She realized this situation a step slower than the others, and couldn't move since she was all tied up.

「R-Release me! Release me right now!」

「Alright alright, no need to panic. Ehh… Move this here, shift this there…」

Ikuta brushed off the Naval Lieutenant's scream with a nonchalant smile, then adjusted the ropes binding her.When the crew gathered after noticing the commotion, Ikuta was already done.

「Okay, it's finished… Suspended bondage-･菱绳绑法! It's the simplified version that forego the groin part, but… Yes! As expected of me, well done!」

Ikuta crossed his arms and smiled casually. As for the Naval Lieutenant with her limbs tied behind her and her body suspended in mid air facing downwards, the only means of retaliation available to her was to lash out in anger.

「Damn it! Damn it! You are not reflecting on your actions at all, how dare you do the same thing you did yesterday…!」

「… Huh? Same thing? You said same thing? No! Absolutely not! Look carefully, today is 菱绳绑法 that binds the entire body! Yesterday was the tortoise shell bondage that emphasize the breasts! The scale and the artistic sense are completely different!」

「Who cares about your perverted insistence! Hey, don't just stand there! Help me get these ropes off!」

The crew wanted to rush to the Naval Lieutenant's side on hearing her orders, but Ikuta stopped them adamantly.

「Wait! It’s too early to do that now! You have not enjoyed the climax of this bondage show yet!」

After forcing the crew back with his strangely passionate gaze, Ikuta turned towards his suspended prey, then pulled out the long and narrow stick that was on his belt.

「Please enjoy– Hee! Poke!」

「... Hyaaa! Ermm! Ughh! Hyaaa!」

Lieutenant Jurgus screamed shrilly after her flank was poked. Her scream was so different from the image she usually has, and the crew were mesmerized.

「Yes! That’s it! There are few things more enjoyable than the reaction of a girl who is poked in such a situation! Poke poke!」

「Ahh! Hyaa! Stop! Stop it! Please stop～!」

The youth then spent the next three minutes poking his prey before sighing with satisfaction.

「... Good, I had my fill. That’s enough for me– Hey you.」

Ikuta turned around and handed the stick he was using to one of the crew standing dumbfoundedly at the side. The youth then showed a brilliant smile, and said to the crew who was staring blankly at the stick in his hand:

「Muster your courage and try it. Don’t worry, you will definitely experience a new world.」

「... Erm... Huh?」

Without giving him time to think, Ikuta went around his back and shoved him hard. Before Lieutenant Jurgus could speak, Ikuta grabbed his right wrist and thrust forth.

「Hyaa!」

「…… Ughh!」

Lieutenant Jurgus' cry caused a sweet numbing sensation to flash across the crew's minds. Feeling that the time was right, Ikuta let go of the seaman's hand. Without needing anyone to push him, the seaman raised his trembling hand and poked the stick.

「Ugh! Erm! –Ummm… Hanji! You asshole! What are you… Ahh mmm!」

「… Ah! W-What did I do!?」

Hanji snapped out of it and let go of the stick. The other crew also returned to their senses and rescued their superior officer who was suspended in mid air.

After the ropes were cut and she was freed, Lieutenant Jurgus punched Hanji right on the bridge of his nose, then started searching the ship with tears in her eyes. But she couldn't find Ikuta after sweeping through every nook and cranny.

The same commotion and the pursuit after the commotion happened four times. But there wasn't any pursuit by the fifth time. By the sixth time, Lieutenant Jurgus' broke down mentally.

「Boss! Please come out! Please, Boss Jurgus!」

The crew knocked on the door where their supervising officer was hiding in, and their painful wails could be heard on the entire ship.

In another room, Torway and his comrade looked at the culprit with a stiff face as they listened to these screams.

「… I learn how terrifying Ik-kun is once again…」

「… Huh? Hey, what are you saying, ikeman. The show is just getting started, I haven't used even a tenth of my rope tying techniques yet! 」

Speaking of Ikuta, he was lying in one of the hammocks in the room, and playing around with the ropes in his hands.

On the other hand, Matthew who was sitting with his back to the wall near the window shook his head with a sigh.

「No, please stop… you did get back at her for us, but this doesn't feel right… Or rather, you are mixing up your goal with your means… 」

The slightly pudgy youth closed his eyes troubledly– their goal wasn't to push Lieutenant Jurgus to the brink of insanity with these perverted assaults. Matthew had to steer the situation into a peaceful resolution, and let both sides acknowledge each other as a comrades on the same ship.

「Ughh… What should I do to achieve this goal…」

Matthew's thoughts were stuck in a loop, and Torway looked at him worriedly– at this moment, Torway noticed a strange shadow flashed past the window above his friend.

「… That is…」

「What's the matter, Torway?」

The mildly plump youth was momentarily stunned to see Torway rushing to the window. But before Torway could speak, the noise informed them of the sudden emergency.

「Unidentified vessel sighted to the starboard side! All hands enter class 2 alert!」

The lazy atmosphere in the room changed. Ikuta was the first to slide off the hammock and charged for the crossbow leaning against the wall. Matthew and Torway followed his lead and slung their Air Shooter onto their shoulders.

「– Boss! Did you hear that!? It's class 2… Uwahh!」

After the scream of the seaman came the sound of something crashing onto the floor. The seaman was probably sent flying by the door that was opened suddenly. Matthew grunted softly when he heard someone dashing across the corridor.

「How's the situation with the unknown vessel?」

After charging out of the officer quarters Lieutenant Jurgus had shut herself in, she rushed up to the deck and asked the lookout keeping watch at the crow's nest. The seaman replied with his eyes still glued to his binoculars:

「Direction, Northwest West, about 3 nautical miles from us. There's heavy fog over the waters, I can't tell anything more than that!」

「Priority is to confirm if that is a war vessel, next is to check if it is part of a fleet– Signalman, have you contacted the flagship?」 [13]

「We already sent light signals! Currently awaiting reply!」

Instructions and responses kept ranging out. The air was tense in a completely different way than before. At this moment, Matthew's trio and their subordinate also came on deck.

「Hey! What's the situation? Should we get armed and standby in the middle of the deck?」

「Shut up! I didn't ask for you! Just stay in your cabin!」

She replied icily. Matthew clicked his tongue, he was hoping that they would work together naturally when things get tense, but it wouldn't be so easy.

「Matthew, Torway, get your guys to lock and load. Do so for your Air Shooter too. Use this chance to look for cover on the deck, and be ready to engage in a shootout at any time.」

Ikuta gave his instructions in a quiet voice, and his comrades took action immediately. Compared to the other crew, their heart entered the battlefield one step ahead of them.

「Alright, what should we do about this?」

At the same time in another place. On the deck of the flagship 「Yellow Dragon」 that was in the center of the fleet, fleet commander Admiral Erynphin Jurgus received the report that an unidentified vessel was sighted, and seemed to be troubled as he crossed his arms.

「We encountered an incident earlier than expected. This is the territorial waters of the Empire, so if those are really Kioka warships, that is really a bold move.」

The admiral's deputy Commander Danmier Kanron analyzed the situation calmly, and the commander-in-chief with thick make up grunted.

「… Never mind that, the important thing is their numbers. If it is one to three ships, they should be out here on reconnaissance. We will need to pursue and capture them, take the good men prisoners and throw the rest overboard…」

「Admiral, I'm really troubled right now. The thought of throwing a tranny who can't restrain itself into the ocean is really tempting right now. Doing so can prevent the violation of wartime treaty, and save the lives of many prisoners, I really…」

「Put down your hands and your squirming fingers, Danmier! That was just a joke!」

While the two of them were kidding around, Yatori, Haro and Princess Chamille made their way past the bustling seamen and ran towards them. The flame haired girl stopped before them and saluted.

「Pardon my intrusion, Admiral Jurgus– I heard the 『Tyrannosaur』 detected an unidentified vessel?」

「Ara, you are really well informed. But that make sense, your comrades are on that ship too.」

「May I ask how you plan to handle this?」

「You are asking with the assumption that the 『unknown vessel is a Kioka warship』, right? Well, there are generally two ways of doing this. If the enemy is few, they will flee once they spotted us. We will just need to order the vessels at the fringe of the fleet formation to pursue and capture them. If they have substantial numbers, I will order the entire fleet to engage in naval warfare on the spot. In either case, we have to wait for the follow up report from Pommy.」

「What would the 『Tyrannosaur』 assignment be for these two situations?」

「As the 『Tyrannosaur』 is the closest to the enemy's position, it will have the honor of being the first to engage the foe in both cases– ah, don't worry about those boys. I will inform the 『Tyrannosaur』 in the next light signal message to send them back to the flagship with small boats before the fight begins.」

So don't worry… The commander-in-chief smiled gently to everyone. It was a considerate move for the sake of their guest, but Yatori turned him down with a shake of her head,

「Our first request is for you to not send such a message.」

「Okay, don't hold back, you can ask anything– Huh? What did you say?」

「It's exactly what you heard. Please don't recall the three of them from the 『Tyrannosaur』, and let them take part in direct battle. If the opponent is the Kioka fleet, I think they will be able to help.」

Yatori explained with a determined tone and took a step forward with her crimson hair swaying behind her. Admiral Jurgus was confused by her intimidating aura.

「…I… I don't think really think your group can be of any assistance. As you know, letting guests like you stand on the frontlines–」



「It would be a disgrace to the navy if reinforcements like us died in battle. However, compared to the crew of the 『Tyrannosaur』, including your niece, is that really important?」

「What–?」

Admiral Jurgus never thought about weighing their importance in such a way, as he didn't considered the Kioka fleet to be a threat on such a level. Before he could grasp what her true intention was, Commander Kanron who was observing from the side spoke:

「…Admiral. It seemed that she judge the threat of the Kioka fleet to be far greater than what we expect. Since this is the judgement of someone who had fought with the Kioka army in the northern territories, I think we should give it adequate consideration.」

The support from an unexpected person made Yatori look at the Naval Commander in surprise. On the other hand, Admiral Jurgus can't ignore what his deputy just said, and fell into deep thought with his arms crossed.

「–Admiral, follow up report from the 『Tyrannosaur』! The vessel has been identified as a Kioka warship. But it's just a single ship without any other support vessels! It is a mid sized three mast ship!」

The new information interrupted his train of thought. After considering it briefly, the commander-in-chief made a compromise.

「… I will still give them permission to return to the flagship. But only if they wish to. First Lieutenant Yatori Shino, will that be fine by you?」

「Yes! I'm grateful for this order, thank you for taking my opinion into consideration.」

Yatori straighten her body and saluted, then cast her gaze to the fog towards the starboard side of the deck, and the seemingly endless sea. She endured the frustration of not being able to take part in battle, and believed firmly that she had supported her comrades in the best way possible.

「– Orders from the flagship! This vessel will pursue and capture the enemy ship, with support from the 『Spearfish』 and 『Bright Stone』! Also, permission has been granted for First Lieutenant Ikuta Solork, First Lieutenant Torway Remeon and Second Lieutenant Matthew Tetzirich to move to the flagship! If they want to, send them back on a boat! End transmission!」

The signalman shouted loud enough for the entire deck to hear. Only then did Lieutenant Jurgus turn towards the army personnel behind her who was already armed and ready.

「... Like what you heard, I will lower a boat, so prepare to leave the ship.」

「I refuse. The message said 『If they want to』, correct? But we don't want to leave.」

Matthew answered immediately on everyone's behalf. The next instance, the Naval Lieutenant drew her saber and closed in on the three of them.

「Stop messing around… this is a real battle, you will just get in the way if you stay, don't you even understand that? Don't look down on the ocean!」

The Naval Lieutenant threatened sternly with her blade pointed their way. But Matthew showed no fear, and grab her collar instead.

「… You are the one who is looking down at war, Lieutenant Jurgus. 」

「W-Why you…!」

「You say this is a real battle? Then it's funny why you are reducing your combat forces right before the battle. If we go back to the flagship, then there will be that much less combatants on this ship! Don't you even understand this logic?」

「I-I don't need to borrow the strength of people like you…!」

「That's why I say you are looking down on war! Listen carefully! There is no telling what will happen on the battlefield! Even if it looks like an easy victory on paper, you should keep as much men on hand as possible to deal with unexpected events! Do you know what will happen if the commander forget this principle? You don't right!? Let me tell you! The number of people who will die will increase ten times!」

The yell from close distance suppressed the Lieutenant Jurgus, and she was momentarily dumbfounded. Both the volume and the heavy experience behind Matthew's word led to this result.

A few seconds later, the Naval Lieutenant snapped back to her senses. She slapped away the hand on her collar, and took a few steps back as if she was trying to flee.

「… I… I don’t care! If you want to ignore the warnings and stay here, then so be it! I don’t have time for this!」

Lieutenant Jurgus spat out these words before running to the aft of the ship. She took a few breaths to calm herself before shouting at the crew waiting for her over there:

「Increase the alert level to class 1! We need to catch the enemy vessel that is upwind from us! Prepare for tacking!」 [14]

「「「「「「「Yes! Boss Jurgus!」」」」」」」

「Charge! You lots! In terms of speed while sailing into the wind, the 『Tyrannosaur』 is the fastest in history! The slow Kioka ships are no match for us! Let them see what we are made of!」

The crew was reunited after the encouraging speech, and rushed to their stations to standby for the next instructions. The Naval Lieutenant issued her first orders.

「Right full rudder!」「Yes!」

The helmsman turned the steering wheel clockwise until the very end. A few seconds later, the ship started changing its bearings.

「Main mast, mizzen mast, turn your yards!」「「「「「Yes!」」」」」 [15]

The crew standing by at the middle and rear masts pulled their ropes and turned the sails. The sails were positioned to take in the wind coming from the starboard side, but it was gradually shifted to face the headwind.

「Now! Left rudder!」 「Yes!」

Seeing from the drop in speed that they had reached the limit of their turn, Lieutenant Jurgus ordered the helmsman to turn the wheel in the other direction. And so, the sail on the fore mast that wasn't shifted caught the wind that was coming straight at the ship, which pushed the ship backwards. As the rudder was being turned to the left during this time, the ship slowly backed away as it angled itself to take in wind from its port side.

「… Good! Fore mast, turn your yard!」

Judging that the bow of the ship was now 45 degrees away from the headwind, the Naval Lieutenant ordered the sails on the fore mast to be turned like the other two masts. With the wind blowing from the port side, the ship regained its speed and the Tyrannosaur started sailing into the wind splendidly.

「Wah! Ughh…!」

As the wind was coming from the port side instead of the starboard side, the ship was slanting the other way too. Torway was unsteady on his feet, while the unaffected Matthew supported him from the back.

「Be careful, the ship rocks most violently when it is tacking… But I didn't know it could be done so smoothly.」

「T-Thank you, Ma-chan… By the way, what does tacking mean?」

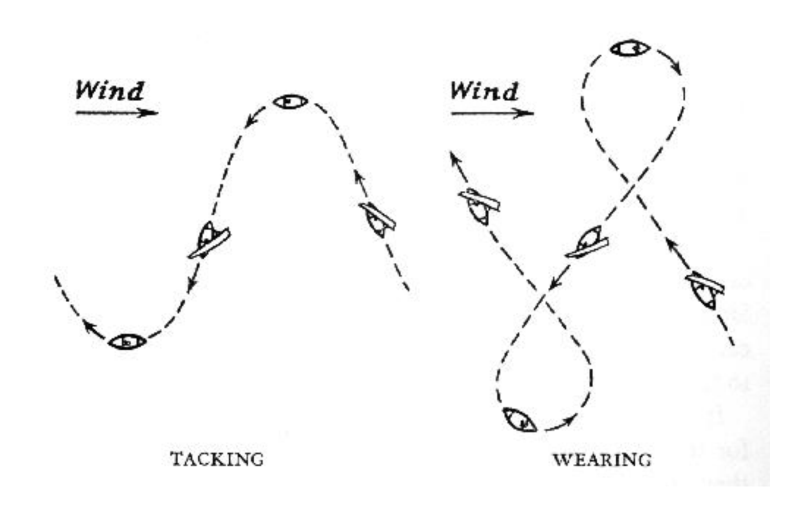
「It is a method of sailing against the wind. As the bearing of the ship is changing, the position of the sail is adjusted too, so the vessel will advance in a '<' shape . No ships can sail directly against the wind, but by using this method, it is possible to sail at an angle against the headwind. By repeating this method, the ship can move against the wind in a zigzag manner.」

Matthew explained in a fluent manner, and had an impressed expression.

「This is definitely not simple. The first requirement are well trained crew working together. Next, if the timing in turning the rudder or sail was off by just a little, the ship would stall at an awkward angle. The responsibility for this rest squarely on the person directing the maneuver.」

The slightly pudgey youth stared at the Naval Lieutenant standing at the stern of the ship. Her back seemed bigger than usual.

「... Another way of sailing against the wind is called wearing, which is easier to perform. However, the trade off is that longer time and distance needed to perform it, which would take too much time when pursuing another ship. Since the enemy vessel is in the upwind, then we can only chase it by tacking.」



「We are three nautical miles from them, correct? Can we catch them…?」

「I don't know. But the enemy is a three mast ship with two square rigged sail and one Fore-and-aft rigged sail. In comparison, our 『Tyrannosaur』 has one square rigged sail and two Fore-and-aft rigged sails. Normally, the Fore-and-aft rigged sails are better suited for tacking. Since we our ship has the advantage, the rest will depend on the skill of the crew.」 [16]

They could vaguely see the enemy vessel on the other end of the heavy fog. Ikuta looked at it as he tightened the drawstring of his crossbow.

「Let's leave the ship handling to the professionals… But the problem is, this isn't a sailing race, but a war. And it seems that Pol-chan still isn't aware of that.」

「– Alright! We are on their tail!」

About four hours after their pursuit began, thanks to the disciplined effort of the crew in performing numerous tacking, they managed to close the distance between the Tyrannosaur and the enemy vessel into shooting range.

The other two ships pursuing alongside them was about half a nautical mile behind, probably due to the difference in skill, which was a cause of alarm for Matthew and the others. Being fast was great, but it would be hard to use their advantage of numbers during a fight.

「… We are almost in Air Rifle range… Ik-kun, what do you make of this situation?」

「… The Empire has started mass production, so the Marine Air Shooter troops has also been issued with Air Rifles. With you and Matthew here, we won't be at a disadvantage when it comes to a shootout. We just need to buy some time for our friendly crafts to support us… However…」

Ikuta narrowed his eyes to observe the enemy ship. Matthew could tell that he was concerned about something and asked:

「– You are worried about Blast cannons, right?」

「That's correct, Matthew. There hasn't been reports of Kioka using Blast cannons in naval battles, but if I get my hands on that weapon, the first thing I would do is put it on a ship.」

「But if that is true, then we are already in their range. But they didn't fire on us, which means…」

「There is also the possibility that the enemy vessels don't have Blast cannons. But we can't let our guard down. It might be hard to imagine without seeing the damage first hand, but it would be too late when we do see it. After all, it would make a world of difference, depending on whether the enemy possess that weapon or not.」

Having first hand experience of the Blast cannons made Ikuta more wary than the others. Affected by his tension, Matthew and Torway looked forward with bated breath, and before them were the enemy vessel they were gaining on.

「Sail parallel to the enemy on our portside! Crossbows and guns form up!」

Under the instruction of Lieutenant Jurgus, the seamen holding Air Rifles and crossbows formed up on the portside of the deck. Torway's face scrowled at the sight of their tight formation.

「This is bad… they had switched to Air Rifles, but they are using them in the same way as Air Shooters. That tight formation is a ripe target for the enemy.」

「It can't be helped, not much time had passed since the last war, they probably didn't have time to implement the changes in tactics to complement the increase in range to the entire military. Even the army is like this, much lest the navy that switched to Air Rifles even later.」

However… Ikuta raised another point. The same should apply to the Kioka. Unless there were enemies on the level of the Phantom unit on the opponent's ship, the proficiency between the riflemen on both sides should be roughly the same.

「Boss! The enemy ship is coming closer to us on their own!」

A seaman reported loudly as the two ships that were about to run parallel to each other got even closer. Lieutenant Jurgus was a little surprised, she thought the enemy would keep their distance and engage in a shootout.

「… So they are not interested in a shootout? Very well then! Helmsman, hard left!」

「Yes!」

Agitated by this, she ordered the rudder to be turned left, closing the distance with the enemy vessel even further. The shootout begun with the crew on both ships in plain sight to each other. The bullets from the enemy vessel flew over the heads of the crew and tore into the sail and wooden masts.

「We will be engaging the enemy! Fix bayonets! Prepare for hand to hand combat–!」

Lieutenant Jurgus' shout predicted that the battle would be over swiftly. To prepare for the enemy boarding, the seamen fixed on their bayonets and spear heads. Matthew and Torway were about to order their subordinates to do the same thing when Ikuta held out a hand to stop them.

「Wait, it's not time yet! Torway! Look at the side of the enemy ship! Not the deck, but the body of the ship! Doesn't it look weird?」

When he heard this question, Torway shifted down his gaze from the top of the ship. The side of the ship was just thick wood from the water up until the deck, and he couldn't see what Ikuta meant by it looking weird.

「No, I don't see anything— Ah!」

His jade-coloured eyes widen. While Torway was looking at the smooth ship's body, squarish opening suddenly appeared all over it. They appeared to be windows that open outwards, and steel cannons with dark glint appeared at these windows in the very next moment.

「– It's cannons! Ik-kun! Seven… No, eight of them! They are lined up across the ship's body…!」

「Everyone hit the deck! Incoming!」

When his ominous feeling turned true, Ikuta started shouting before he thought any further. However, only his comrades from the army reacted after hearing this warning. Most of the seamen paid no heed to the words from the army personnel, and that moment heed them while their guard were down.

A thunder-like clap shook everyone's ears, and the entire 「Tyrannosaur」 rocked at the same time. Some of the seamen who

formed ranks at the portside of the ship exploded into pieces and flew into the sea on the starboard side of the ship. Those who weren't hit directly fell onto the deck, the sea or onto the sails. More than 10 men died from this hit alone.

「Ughh…!」

Ikuta groaned in pain. He didn't escape unscathed although he knew the impact was coming, and his waist was bruised after hitting some ropes. The unharmed Matthew and Torway stood up. They were heading Ikuta's way to help their injured comrade, but was rejected sternly by the subject himself.

「Don't mind me, run to the stern of the ship! She's going to fall!」

The two of them turned their head to the aft of the vessel in surprise, and found the upper body of Lieutenant Jurgus who got blown away earlier hanging over the railings. She seemed to have lost conscious, and was gradually slipping into the sea.

「Damn it! Please let me be in time…!」

Matthew who was closer sprinted off the deck. When he reached the aft, Lieutenant Jurgus' body slipped off the railing entirely. Matthew's right hand grabbed her ankle at the nick of time.

「Ughh…! W-Wake up! Idiot! This is no time to be knocked out!」

「… Huh…?」

The upside down Lieutenant Jurgus regained consciousness. She saw the waters below her, then looked up and found Matthew grabbing her ankles, and understood how perlicious the situation was.

「What… Ahhh! Uwah! Hyaaa…!」

「Stop panicking! I can't hang on…! I'm betting it all on pulling you up in one shot!」

After saying that, Matthew grabbed the railing firmly with his left hand, then pulled the Naval Lieutenant up by her ankle with his right hand. When her upper body got high enough, Lieutenant Jurgus stretched her arms to grab the lower half of the railings. Matthew took a breath at this point, then pulled again and finally brought her safely back to the deck.

「Huff… Puff–」 「Don't rest here, moron!」

The shock of her close brush with death left the Naval Lieutenant deflated on the floor. Matthew stood up, unwilling to waste time catching his breath, and dragged her behind a mast. After taking cover from gunfire, Matthew grabbed the shoulders of the stunned Lieutenant Jurgus and shook her hard.

「Hey! Get a grip! The battle is not over yet!」

「Ah… Ughh… What… What happened…?」

「It's cannon fire from the Kioka vessel! And it is so strong that we might sink if we are unlucky! I had mentioned about Blast cannons plenty of times in the past, remember!?」

「I… I don't understand… I don't… know what that is…!」

She complained with a crying face, and looked so frail that it was hard to imagine her acting like a pirate in the past. Matthew clicked his tongue and let go of her shoulders— it was impossible for her to recover and resume her post as commander.

「… I get it, just stay here and take a breather. Calm down, and take back command when you have composed yourself, understand?」

Matthew instructed without any expectations, then dashed out from the back of the mast with his back bent, and hurried back to his comrades. Torway had gathered Matthew's subordinates along with his, and was directing them to engage the enemy.

「Keep firing! Target the gunners at the flank of the ship, stop them from firing again!」

「You two at the top of the mast! Snipe the high ranking crew on the enemy's ship! Hit them where it hurts!」

Ikuta gave instructions through the pain on his waist, but the situation remained dire. The crew of the 「Tyrannosaur」 had yet to recover from their confusion, so they were effectively outnumbered. And the ship was still maintaining an approach towards the enemy ship before the cannon barrage, so the two vessels would cross paths again soon. Not only would they be hit from close range, the enemy might even board and attack directly.

「This is bad…!」

When Torway muttered that anxiously, a sharp gong rang out on the 「Tyrannosaur」 that had fallen into despair. That sound seemed to chase all the fear from the crew, and was followed by the strong hoarse voice of an old man that boomed across the deck.

「Hey! Get a hold of yourself, you scums!」

The voice came from the aft of the deck— besides the steering wheel which had lost its helmsman from the earlier attack. It was the captain of the 「Tyrannosaur」 who had been recusing himself all this while, Ragieshī Naval Commander Kutsuchi. Seeing the ship falling into despair, the veteran sailor cast aside his image of an elderly, and his body was full of youthful vigour.

「Turn the yard of the foremast to the left! Let the sail catch the headwind!」

The Naval Commander instructed without any hesitation. He tossed the gong he was beating just now aside, and grabbed the steering wheel himself. The old man then encouraged the confused crew loudly again.

「Why are you lot just standing around!? And you call yourselves seamen of the Katjvarna navy!? Those who can stand get back to your post! Can't you follow the lead of our army allies!?」

The crew regained their discipline the moment they heard this shout. Remembering their duties, they moved hurriedly on the ship and back to their posts. Naval Commander Kutsuchi who turned the steering wheel to the right repeating the order he gave earlier.

「Like I said, turn the yard of the foremast to the left! Quickly, before the enemy fire again!」

With the impact from just now still fresh on their minds, the crew carried out the order with frantic haste. With the wheel and yard turned, the wind that was coming at them at an angle was coming directly against them, and the sails caught the headwind fully. This was like applying emergency brakes to the ship, reducing its speed drastically– a short moment later, another lightning clap came from the Kioka vessel that had moved on ahead.

「That… was close…!」

Matthew felt a chill down his spine as he watch the cannon fire flew narrowly pass the bow of the ship. If Naval Commander Kutsuchi intervene any later, the 「Tyrannosaur」 would suffer crippling damage from extremely close distance.

「Turn the ship into the tailwind! We are sailing back to the fleet at top speed. Landlubbers brat, any objections about that!?」

「We agree completely…! But the body of the ship is damaged from the first cannon volley, and their sails are bigger than ours too! Can we really escape?」

「It would be tough for this ship alone, but we have support vessels on our side! I'm old friends with the captain of the 『Spearfish』, and he will take the appropriate actions to keep the enemy at bay!」

Naval Commander Kutsuchi answered confidently. Ikuta, Matthew and Torway believed the bold smile of this old sailor who had returned to the frontlines, and started moving on the 「Tyrannosaur」 once again.

On the same evening, the jaws of the other members of the Katjvarna navy almost drop when they saw the terrible state of the ship that barely manage to escape the enemy.

「W-What's going on…?」

There were two large holes on the flank of the ship, and the sail on the main mast was all torn up. The equipment on the ship looked as if it had been ravaged by a giant. It was a miracle that it was still afloat.

「There is only one enemy ship, correct? We pursued them with supporting vessels too, how did this happen…? A-Anyway, send the wounded to the infirmary!」

After the two vessels linked out, the casualties who were on death's door were transported to the flagship via the gangway of the 「Tyrannosaur」. The crew of the 「Yellow Dragon」 watched this procession with bated breath. This was followed by the injured who

could still walk by themselves. Matthew led the way, followed by Ikuta who was leaning on Torway's shoulder.

「Solork, you are hurt…!」 「Let… Let me see the wound!」

Princess Chamille, Haro and Yatori ran out of the crowd and to the side of the three of them. Ikuta turned towards them, and cried in pain.

「… It hurts~ my back hurts~… Haro, I'm dying~ Save me～」

「Pull yourself together! I will save you! You got hit by an arrow? Or a rifle?」

「No, he just took a hard bump… I get it now. This theory only applies to Ikuta, when he emphasize how much something hurts, that is a sign his injury is trivial.」

Haro sighed in relief after pulling Ikuta's shirt open, as if she was confirming Matthew's analysis. Princess Chamille also patted her chest in relief, while Yatori walked up to the youth.

「… Just the damage to the ship alone shows how intense a battle it was. Was fighting this battle the right call for you all?」

「The ship barely making it back without sinking is the answer. Thank you for convincing Admiral Jurgus, that is a wonderful assist. 」

Ikuta gave a thumbs up, and the vermillion haired girl responded with a smile. At this moment, Commander Kanron walked past them with a stern face, then stopped.

「Naval Commander Kutsuchi, Lieutenant Jurgus, please report to the Admiral's office. Admiral Jurgus is waiting for your report.」

The shoulders of the sullen Naval Lieutenant jumped. Naval Commander Kutsuchi who was beside her nodded and pushed the seemingly frozen Naval Lieutenant's back lightly. The two of them then started walking.

After they left, Commander Kanron turned to Yatori's group.

「I don't need everyone to be there, but the admiral requested for your presence. Especially the group from the 『Tyrannosaur』, please send at least one representative.」

「Understood– Haro, can we leave Ikuta to you? He is still a casualty after all.」

「Leave him to me!」 Haro replied energetically when she heard that. After getting an answer, Yatori shifted her gaze to the Princess.

「Your Highness, if it is not too much trouble, please stay with Haro.」

「Yes, understood. I will tie up Solork tightly… I mean let him rest properly.」

Yatori bowed towards the Princess who acceded to her request readily, nodded at Matthew and Torway, then replied to Commander Kanron quietly:

「The three of us will go. May I trouble you to lead us to the Admiral's Office?」

The Admiral's office was traditionally located at the very tail end of a military vessel in the Katjvarna Navy.

The size of the 「Yellow Dragon」 was the largest in the entire fleet. In the deepest end of this large room was Admiral Erynphin Jurgus, who was waiting at a huge table with his chin resting on his hands.

「I saw the state of the ship. It was a terrible defeat.」

His tone wasn't accusatory, and was calm instead. Yatori's trio stood at attention behind, and Lieutenant Jurgus hung her head low as usual. The Naval Commander Kutsuchi nodded seriously.

「This is my responsibility. As the captain, it is my fault for underestimating the threat posed by the Kioka ship.」

「Hmmp, Gramps Kutsuchi, that might sound like humble and apologetic, but you are actually using this to Admonish me instead, right? Because I'm the first one who misjudge their threat.」

Admiral Jurgus said with a sigh as he leaned back on his chair. Matthew and Torway were a little moved. The person before them was unlike their previous superior officers, and wouldn't scream agitatedly when unexpected things happens.

「Be it admonishing or reflecting, I want to hear the report. Tell me what happened in chronological order after you caught up with the Kioka vessel.」

Urged by the Admiral, Naval Commander Kutsuchi slowly recounted the event– the 「Tyrannosaur」 sailed against the wind in pursuit of the enemy ship, and attempted to engage in a shootout after catching up. But they were hit by an extraordinary fierce attack. He added that when the crew of the 「Tyrannosaur」 was in confusion because of that, and asked Matthew and Torway who engaged the enemy during that time to state their report.

「... Oh I see. Simply put, after getting hit by that Blast cannon, the crew got so spooked that they can't even put up a proper fight?」

「That's right. After the cannon barrage, only these kids and their subordinates manage to respond calmly. It's a shame, but even I needed some time to understand what actually happened.」

Naval Commander Kutsuchi said without hiding anything. After hearing that, Admiral Jurgus turned his gaze to his niece who had remained silent this entire time.

「Pommy, what are you views on this?」

「…………!」

「Don't stay quiet like a statue, state your opinion on how it was like to get hit so hard. Even though you were knocked out after the barrage, you still witness the scene after that, correct? How was it?」

Admiral Jurgus' tone wasn't accusatory, and he probably wasn't trying to admonish her either. However, the mental state of his subject had been forced into a corner, and she couldn't even judge this properly.

「… I … didn't know…」

「Huh?」

「… I didn't know that thing exist! I have never seen such a powerful cannon…! T-That's why I followed my training and sailed alongside the enemy vessel… in an attempt to dwindle down the enemy's numbers with Air Shooters and arrows, before commencing boarding actions… I thought we can win if we did that! I was thought that we can win if we did that, but… but…!」

What she was saying was no longer a report. Admiral Jurgus' brows furrowed as he listened.

「Things… Things were going well until we caught up! We didn't fail a single tacking! It was our complete victory in terms of seafaring techniques! But… t-that cannon is too despicable…! If not for that cannon, we would have won! That's right! Isn't that so? Don't you think so, Grandpa Kutsuchi?」

When he heard the Naval Lieutenant pleading for him to go along with her, Naval Commander Kutsuchi remained silent with a painful expression. Lieutenant Jurgus wanted to continue protesting, but Admiral Jurgus couldn't stand her unsightly behaviour any longer and said sternly:

「… Enough! Pommy, leave. Get out of this room this instant.」

「W-Wait, uncle, I…!」

「Enough, I can't listen any more. Don't you now how unsightly you are acting right now? I want you to review the reason for losing the battle, not for you to make excuses.」

「… Ughh!」

「All this talk of smooth sailing in the middle and how you can win if not for that… No matter what you say, the results remains the same. Rambling on like this is a disgrace. Are you going to call yourself a descendent of Jurgus with an attitude like that?」

The last words stabbed deep into her heart, and robbed her of all her excuses. Large tear drops kept rolling out of the Naval Lieutenant's eyes, as if a dam had been broken.

「I was the one who misjudged you. Pommy, I am relieving you of your assignment on the 『Tyrannosaur』, and I won't let you return to that ship. Just stay in some corner on this ship until you receive further orders!」

This decision by her uncle destroyed the last bastion of hope in the Naval Lieutenant's heart.

「Ah– Hey!」

Lieutenant Jurgus covered her crying face with one hand and finally charge out of the Admiral's office.Matthew listened to the footsteps from the corridor that was getting further away, and could only stand there stiffly, unable to even put them his outreached right hand.

「Leave her be. The important thing is the after action report– But let me be clear, after this incident, you will no longer be 『honored guests』. You can be happy, sad or whatever, but the first thing is to accept this fact.」

Admiral Jurgus announced in a heavy tone, while his deputy sighed. After learning that their group was finally being treated as reinforcements, Yatori and Torway looked at their superior officer with renewed eyes.

Only Matthew was still concerned about Lieutenant Jurgus who had bolted out of the door behind them.

「Hmm… In other words, we got lucky because of this misfortune?」

Haro summarized the important point– after the debriefing in the Admiral's office, the five members of the Knight Corps and the Princess headed to the room assigned to the girls, and gathered for the first time in a while.

「Yes, that's the gist of it. Our side is now on guard against the threat of the Kioka, and also prove the effectiveness of our experience in a fight. The lost of lives is a tragedy… but compared to being guests being protected, this is a big improvement.」

Yatori nodded. At this moment, a youth whose bare upper body was covered in bandages crawled out from his bed. Haro pressed his shoulders down frantically.

「No you can't, Mr Ikuta. You need to rest! There isn't any bone fractures, but it is still a serious contusion…!」

「L-Let me go…! Pol-chan… Pol-chan is waiting for me…」

Ikuta kept mumbling while Haro and Princess Chamille pushed him back onto bed forcefully. The slightly plump youth sitting opposite the bed watched this scene with a serious face.

「… Just leave that girl be, she got her just desserts. If she worked together with us right from the start, she could have minimized the casualties by a lot…」

After Matthew said that in a deep voice, Ikuta replied with a groan with his back on the bed.

「That hurts… You might be right. But Matthew, she is still young…
」

「She's older than us. And this isn't a matter that can be excused with age, correct?」

「Is that really true… Then, did we never thought it strange how young we were during the war in the northern territories…? We had to shoulder immense pressure of the lives of so many people at the very fore of the frontlines. And that was before we were twenty, had the thought of 『why the hell are brats like us doing this』 never crossed your mind…?」

「… Even if it did, no one will listen.」

「Yes, that's true… It was one of the serious mistakes in that battlefield, so we had to figure a way out without depending on anyone. Before linking up with Major Sazarf, we had no other choice but to rely on ourselves…」

「……」

「But Matthew… Do you think everyone can overcome that obstacle by themselves…?」

Matthew couldn't find the words to answer, and couldn't nod without hesitation either. Because he couldn't say he survived that swamp-like battlefield in the northern territories by his own strength. Even during the civil war against the Shinaak, he was always relying on his excellent comrades– Ikuta, Yatori and Torway.

「Even if you research the history of the navy, you would be hard pressed to find someone as young as Pol-chan with the de facto responsibilities of a captain… She must have made it through her exemplary skills and other factors helping her. The most crucial one being 『a descendent of Jurgus』, so she was definitely being forced into the role of hero from birth. At the same time, she must have worked extremely hard to meet this expectation…」

Having experienced the same thing, the two people who also hailed from the 「Three Loyal Houses」 lowered their gaze. Ikuta cast a sideway glance their way, then sighed.

「Not everyone can live like Yatori and Torway… for most of them, a life spent meeting the expectations set by others is too heavy. And today, Pol-chan fell because of this enormous pressure… and she isn't the only one at fault. The people around her who turned a blind eye to her immature personality and pushed her to such a high position shares most of the blame too… Hence, before we blame her

for anything, we should reprimand the environment of the navy that didn't provide her with the chance to develop properly…」

「… If the environment one grows up in can be an excuse, then the same applies to everyone who had failed… That Lieutenant General Safida might say the same thing!」

「Yes… If you put it this way, it is too late for Lieutenant General Safida. There is no other way for him to take responsibility aside from being executed as an example to others. But Matthew… Even with that in mind, I still have to say this. Pol-chan is still young. And she isn't our superior officer. In terms of battle experience, she is our junior instead. I don't want to ditch her like this.」

Matthew bit his lips and remained silent. Ikuta's face was twisted from the pain.

「As for reprimanding a junior sternly for their mistakes… yelling and encouraging them are just the means, but in the end, cautioning them and guiding them is the one true way. Even more so for kids, it is not effective to point out their mistakes directly… Because that is the wrong way of educating them, which is in turn the result of the wrong method of raising them. If we don't go in depth and look closely at the source, we can't change anything no matter how much we admonish them…」

His words had wandered off the matter of Lieutenant Jurgus. But his monologue hit Princess Chamille harder than Matthew. Just how that youth thought about her– the young girl finally understood a little better, and clenched her fists.

「… Damn it…!」

Matthew cursed under his breath and got up from the bed, then head for the exit Torway said immediately:

「– Wait, Ma-chan. Are you going to see the Naval Lieutenant now?」

「……」

「I think that's good. On that ship, you are the one who treat the Naval Lieutenant more seriously than anyone else… So I think you can find the words to say to her right now.」

The youth seemed proud to say that about his friend. With the encouragement from his friend, Matthew took a deep breath and walk out of the room with determination.

The 「Yellow Dragon」 was the biggest of its kind, which made finding one person on this ship that much harder. It would be a waste of time to search mindlessly, so Matthew decided to emulate Ikuta, and thought in a 「scientific」 way.

「First of all… she wants to be alone.」

Just this condition eliminated the number of places he needed to search drastically. Lieutenant Jurgus who wasn't a crew on this ship didn't have her own quarters, and there was barely any places in the ship that would allow someone to stay in it indefinitely. A toilet would be the only exception, but it was hard to imagine her choosing such a place when there were other options. So Matthew decided to check that place last.

「In that case, the most possible answer is…」

Matthew who already had an idea walked briskly through the corridor, and headed up the stairs and onto the deck. Under the night sky filled with sparkling stars, the First Naval Fleet that was forced to review their strategy after their first defeat had set anchor in the middle of the sea.

As the sail retraction had been done, only a few crew were still working on the ship. Although the starboard side was still connected to the 「Tyrannosaur」 that was under repairs– Lieutenant Jurgus was probably not permitted to return to that ship. Hence, Matthew filtered the 「Tyrannosaur」 from his mind, and move his gaze around the deck of the flagship. He started inspecting possible hiding spots that was inconspicuous, and…

「… Tch! She is in such a place…」

Fortunately, the moon was bright. In the middle of the main mast– more than 20 meters above sea level, there was a crow nest. Matthew could barely made out the figure of someone slouching in it.

Lieutenant Jurgus noticed the noise of someone climbing the rope ladder, and started shrinking away.

She continued hugging her knees and turned just her head back. At this moment, the one climbing reached the bottom of the crow nest. The Naval Lieutenant watched with bated breath as the familiar face of the slightly pudgey youth poked out.

「… Hi.」

「……」

「There's space for me here, so… pardon my intrusion.」

After climbing into the crow nest and not looking down, Matthew leaned against the mast and sat down beside Lieutenant Jurgus. The next moment, the dark seas filled his entire field of vision, and the youth felt an indescribable fear, which made him gulped.

「You are really something, you can actually feel depressed in a place like this… I'm so scared that I don't care about anything else.」

「… W-What are you doing here…」

「Erm, well… What is it again? What did I come here to do?」

Matthew looked as if he didn't understand himself, and tilted his head. Lieutenant Jurgus buried her face between her knees in an attempt to get away from him.

「G-Go away…! Just leave me alone here…!」

「No, even if you say that, I need to stay a bit longer before I can muster my courage to go down… Hey, the way you're talking feels different than before? Or rather, your personality is different?」



The surprised Matthew carefully observed the person before him. She was just like a rabbit drenched by the rain, and the sight of her tightly withdrawn body made the youth realize the truth.

「… Hey… Are you the type of person who is only arrogant in your own home? And is very extreme about it.」

「…… Ughh!」

「I had been wondering about how docile you were pretending to be when I first met you together with Admiral Jurgus, and you only revealed your true nature when we boarded the Tyrannosaur… But seeing how you are right now, that is probably wrong. The you right now is your true self. So you can only become a female pirate who swings her saber around on your own ship, right?」

「D-Don't say something so conceited! I'm always acting true to myself!」

「The cat is out of the bag now, so don't say anymore… I would prefer you to stay like this though. Instead of being called a fatty or a pig, I will have an easier time.」

Matthew concluded with a sigh, and the Naval Lieutenant who was crushed by her shame buried her face between her knees again. The crow's nest twenty metres above sea level was shrouded in silence. Matthew who was extremely troubled as he didn't know what to say thought about it for a while, and decided to tell her what he had been bothering him from the beginning.

「Hey… I'm sorry if I got it wrong, but that scar on your right cheek…
」

After a moment's hesitation, Matthew continued:

「… Did you scar it yourself?」

Lieutenant Jurgus' shriveled shoulders shook, and she lifted her head with a quiver.

「… W-Why…?」

「Erm, don't worry, I'm not looking down on you. I have the same wound.」

After Matthew said that, he touched the lower part of his right cheek. It was hard to see under the moonlight, but there was a thin and long scar he inflicted on himself there. It looked small and trivial compared to the Naval Lieutenant. But the 「origin」 of their scars were the same.

「Idolizing Captain Garciev is something anyone who like ships would experienced, and furthermore, he is your ancestor… But I'm impressed that you made such a big wound. I started crying after cutting lessing than 3 cm, and my Mom lectured me when she found out.」

Matthew's face was heating up from embarrassment. He suddenly realized… that Lieutenant Jurgus was staring at him and listening attentively.

「……Garciev Jurgus. He was a hero who raised a fleet with the sea as his base during the turbulent era, and a great sailor who was the first to invent the technique of sailing against the wind. Most importantly, he was an adventurer who was always sailing out into the ocean in search of uncharted lands.」

Matthew closed his eyes, and could see in his mind the tales of adventure that led to his yearning for the sea when he was young. It started with the bedtime story that his mother Hanna Tetzirich told him. Captain Garciev's tale was filled with twists and turns, and the

exaggerated tales with bits of historical facts mixed in amused Matthew so much that he would not want to sleep.

「He was best known as the 『Hero of an adventure tale』, but his achievement in the military was astounding too. He founded the organization that later become the Katjvarna Navy, and the way he organized the Naval roles and positions was also revolutionary. Boatswain, Chief Navigator, Marine commander… These appointments we took for granted didn't exist before Captain Garciev showed up. Because of his bold and rugged personality, he was the one responsible for the infamous name of the Katjvarna Pirate Navy… But contrary to his reputation, there was no doubt that he was the one who laid the foundation that transformed the unruly pirates fleet into the orderly Navy.」

His passionate tone could only be heard from someone talking about something they truly love. Lieutenant Jurgus was completely engrossed, but the slightly plump youth sighed.

「The skills and spirit of that Captain Garciev is inherited by house Jurgus, where you came from. After all, house Jurgus is also a part of the 『The Three Loyal House』, and their historical standing rivals that of house Igsem and Remeon… I think only the descendants themselves would know how it is to shoulder the pressure of such a heritage.」

「……」

「But Lieutenant Jurgus. During my journey on the 『Tyrannosaur』, we had never thought of you as a member of house Jurgus. We simply think of you as our colleague in the armed forces, a comrade on equal standing. I hope you can understand that.」

Matthew scratched his head as he said that while Lieutenant Jurgus rubbed her eyes that were swollen from crying with the back of her palms.

「Don't keep looking to the top, try looking back at your real self. Stop thinking of propping yourself up by bullying others… A commander would want to look good in front of her subordinates, but if you get tricked by such an illusion, that would be putting the cart before the horse.」

「… Ughh…!」

「When the battle deteriorates, a paper tiger would be the first to get blown away, I had suffered a lot because of that in the northern territories… I'm not telling you to stop putting up a front, since that is necessary. But in a battle field with nowhere to go, even a paper tiger needs to be top class.」

When Matthew was smiling awkwardly because of what he said, he heard a voice say in a sobbing tone:

「… Denshishi, Makuni, Yauza, Yondorke…」

「?」

「They are crew members of the 『Tyrannosaur』. But they are gone now. Because I'm a paper tiger, they are all dead… I heard they were blown to bits by cannon fire and I didn't even realize it…! They fell into the waters, even… even their corpses are gone…!」

「… Yes…」

Matthew looked sideways at the sobbing Naval Lieutenant, and sighed… He had experienced this pain before, and many faces flashed before his eyes. Towards the end of the northern territories

war, many lives were lost in the retreating battle against the Aldera holy army. They were his first subordinates… that he trained himself.

「…… This is really painful…」

「…… Don't say this so casually…! As if you understand very well…!」

「But I do know… I really do.」

Matthew could feel the same pain as he kept nodding… Lieutenant Jurgus' sobbing continued under the star filled sky, with no telling when it would end. However, he was fine with waiting as long as she takes. The slightly plump youth decided to stay here as if it was only natural, until she stopped crying.

Further to the east of the eastern territorial waters of the Empire, which the Katjvarna First Naval Fleet was sailing on. This was the waters controlled by Kioka. And several sail ships were on the ocean that was ushering the dawn.

「No resting! Listen up! A hundred times more!」

「「「「「「「Sir, yes, sir!」」」」」」」

Marines could be seen practising their sword swings on the front deck of one of these ships. Their weapons weren't much different from the Katjvarna navy. On the unsteady ship, compared to crossbows or Air Shooters, shorter and easy to wield sabers were preferred.

「What's with your weak stances!? You think you are chopping vegetables in a kitchen! Another hundred!」

「「「「「「「Sir, yes, sir!」」」」」」」

The burly man who seemed to be the marine commander ordered his men drenched in sweat to continue. Since the marines don't have

a chance to perform unless there was a battle, and spending long periods of time on standby would dull their bodies, so this wasn't meaningless abuse like what happened on the 「Tyrannosaur」. However– leaving that aside, there were two prominent things about the man barking out orders.

First was the large and long weapon in his hand. It was a war axe with a hook on it, and no one else was holding such an incredible weapon. Second– there was a wound on the right side of the man's face. It reached right to the base of his ears, with his teeth visible through his cut on his cheeks that had turned purple.

Bang! The blunt end of the war axe knocked the deck heavily. Seeing the soldiers flinched at this noise, the man sighed and walked over in huge strides.

「That won't do… You lot are all wimps.」

The man slowly walked between his subordinates who were closing their mouth shut with a their faces green, and glared at each of them. This was enough to strike fear into their hearts. He finally stopped before a soldier.

「Especially you, Kuranga. What's with that swing? You think we are playing?」

「N-No… I'm not…」

「I already told you, unleash your killing intent. Swing your blade with the thought of killing the enemy before you… I already told you so many times, but you seemed to have forgotten on this long and leisure journey.」

The man scratched the back of his head impatiently, then smirked his mouth that had splitted open.

「Don’t worry, I will make you remember right now.」

「... Huh–!」

The next moment, the man swung the war axe with his right hand nimbly. The marine who thought his head would be lopped off blocked with his saber and flinched. But contrary to what he expected, the murderous weapon stopped right before it reached.

「Fuu–」

However, that wasn’t the end of it. The hook on the other side of the axe caught onto the marine’s collar, and that man lifted the marine off his feet with brute force alone.

「U-Uwah…!」 「Don’t move.」

The man held the man that was hooking his subordinate with one hand, and headed to the edge of the deck. Under the gaze of the marines watching with bated breath, he used his war axe like a fishing rod and lowered the suspended marine towards the sea.

「Hyee…! C-Commander! Please spare me! Commander Greg…!」

The marine screamed when he saw the raging ocean right below him… It didn’t rain today, but the wind was howling, so the waves were strong. He understood how dangerous it was to fall into the sea since he was a marine.

「Stop talking, bait. You will spook the fishes. I will let you off if I catch a big one.」

The man called Greg answered calmly. This was no joke, using human as bait would only draw sharks or the likes. The marine would be in mortal danger if he got bit… He probably didn’t need to wait

that long anyway. The sound of the marine's uniform ripping was akin to a countdown to him falling into the water.

The marine was in despair, but Greg just picked his nose as he rocked the war axe back and forth. At this moment– a bird flew across their sights. When the bird that was diving at high speed touched the sea, its claw reached for the fish under the water surface; when it took flight once again, it had gotten hold of a fish that was about 50 cm long.

The bird was pleased with its prey circled around before gliding above the heads of the marines and landing on the front of the deck. However, it didn't land directly on the deck, but on the shoulder of a certain person.

「Well done, Misai.」

After catching the fish that was tossed to her from the air nimbly, she complimented her beloved pet bird. At first glance, her attire was strange. The Kioka navy uniform worn her on her thicc body was still passable, but the round, wide brim triangular hat, and her white jacket made from feathers had an exotic feel about it. Her dark amber eyes gave the impression of wisdom, akin to that of an old owl.

The bird that landed on that person's shoulder cawed loudly. The bird named Misai had a white body and black wings– an osprey. It is also called a sea hawk because of how good it was at fishing. This osprey that was almost 70 cm long was large even among its kind.

「Will this do, Greg?」

She walked towards the marine commander with the prey of her pet bird in hand. She was tall for a woman, but compared to the burly Greg, their difference in height was like that of father and daughter.

「Thank you very much, Mdm Rear Admiral.」

Greg pulled back his war axe and set his suspended subordinate down on the deck when he heard what the woman's words. He then stood at attention and saluted before receiving that fish respectfully.

「—– A mahi-mahi, huh? Misai sure is an excellent partner to catch such a big fish.」 [17]

「Yes, isn't that right? I hope you can share a slice with this child.」

「I will send over the largest slice– got that, Kuranga?」

Greg smiled at his subordinate that was panting with his butt on the deck. Kuranga got up hastily and took the fish, and charged down the stairs at the front of the deck to send it to the kitchen. The lady watched him go and said softly:

「– My apologies for letting you bear with boredom for so long.」

「It can't be helped. It is our duty to wait, even if it is for a century.
」

「I didn't expect the wait to be so long too… Or rather, I'm surprised that we still need to wait for the enemy right now. Because I firmly believe that the next time our orders come, it would be for an all out attack that heralds the demise of the Empire.」

「If we took down the northern territories as planned, it would be a matter of time before things ended up that way– are we expecting too much from that brat?」

Greg thought back to the white-haired officer he met in the past and complained. The woman shook her head slowly.

「Jean worked hard on it. He incited a civil war with the Shinaak tribe, and convinced Aldera to invade while the Northern stronghold were exhausted– He formulated such a grandiose plan by himself and executed it perfectly. How many Major Generals in Kioka can accomplish the same thing?」 [18]

「That's true. But it's a fact that he messed up the last crucial strike. That's why we are so bored right now.」

「I know what you mean, but you are too harsh towards Jean, Greg. Do you still hold a grudge because of that scar?」

When he heard what the woman said, Greg touched the large crack in his right cheek.

「Well… I'm fine with that brat, but I will definitely get back at that guy with a manly face.」

「The one who fought with you is Captain Harrah, correct? However, if Jean didn't interfere back down, you would have died in battle or be executed…」

「Yes, I'm in his debt, but my honour is a different matter.」

「Hmm～ maybe it's because I'm a woman, I don't understand you sometimes…」

The lady shook her head with a sigh, and her pet bird cawed at this moment. Sensing its intentions, the lady shifted his head towards the wind.

「– The wind seemed to be picking up, it will be prudent to let the crew prepare to retract the sails.」

「Misai's forecast can't go wrong. If only the winds would bring the battle to us too.」

「The vessel that had infiltrated the Empire’s waters would bring back news soon… But Greg, our mission right now is to protect this ocean, so isn’t it for the best if we maintain the status quo without any battles?」

「Yes, I know that. But Rear Admiral, both you and I aren’t so old that we will willingly accept boredom.」

「I don’t think that way. If the peace that inevitably come one day means an eternity of boredom, I am willing to accept that.」

「In that case, it would be a pity if we don’t wreck havoc before that day comes, ayy?」

Greg said half-jokingly, then turned and left after saluting her. The woman watched him leave with a fearless smile, then cast her gaze towards the horizon.

「… Yes, he has a point. Jean and I knows better than anyone else how futile war is– but that’s why we have to proactively guide the war quickly to its end.」

Misai cawed in response, and the corner of her lips raised as she felt her fighting spirit soar.

「Come at me any time, Imperial army. When this boredom ends, I will transform into an falcon and take flight to end your lives.」

She declared her inevitable victory to the sea… Rear Admiral of the Kioka navy, the commander of the Fourth Fleet Elulufay Tenerexilla. A small nation in the east, Laoh, fought with Jean Arkinex’s former home country, Bayushie, in the past, and destroyed each other– and she was a descendent of the 「Falconer Tribe」 from Laoh. The only female admiral in the Kioka navy.


DISCORD

NOTES

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poll_tax [↑]

2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sari [↑]

3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lieutenant_(navy)#%22First_lieutenant%22_in_naval_usage [↑]

4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Junior_officer [↑]

5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Square_rig

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fore-and-aft_rig [↑]

6. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferry [↑]

7. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carling_(sailing) [↑]

8. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marines [↑]

9. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mooring_(watercraft)#Mooring_line_materials [↑]

10. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scurvy [↑]

11. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Field_officer [↑]

12. Kikkou shibari [↑]

13. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Signalman_(rank) [↑]

14. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tacking_(sailing) [↑]

15. https://www.thefreedictionary.com/mizzenmast

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yard_(sailing) [↑]

16. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rigging#Fore-and-aft_rigged_vessels [↑]

17. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahi-mahi [↑]

18. The Japanese term for Generals and Admirals are both 将, so she isn't referring specifically to the army. [↑]